

DAYLIGHT DIMS

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DIMS

-VOLUME ONE-

EDITED BY

J. W. Zulauf & Kristopher Mallory

Baltimore, Maryland.

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For Halloween

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*Deep into that darkness
peering...*



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-INTRODUCTION-

J.W. ZULAUF & KRISTOPHER MALLORY

Hello Daylight Dimmers,

After thinking long and hard about how to create the right introduction for this anthology, we have decided to be straightforward with the facts. The other part on the agenda is a slightly more detailed description of what we really stand for so that you can learn about the project and become more involved.

Thank you for coming along with us. We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed creating it for you.

THE FACTS You don't like to mess around.

The basic facts suit you just fine.

We respect that.

Who: J. W. Zulauf and Kristopher Mallory, creators and editors of this project, thirteen dedicated authors, three talented artists, four insightful readers, and many more.

What: Daylight Dims—a hand-picked collection of horror stories.

Where: In print and online.

When: October 31st annually.

Why: To help create a community for horror authors. This is who we are at the core.

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Ah, so you have chosen to learn more about Daylight Dims!
Nice move.

One of the first items that became a key driver behind Daylight Dims was the desire to have a strong community. When we say community, we mean a band of quality authors, artists, and other creative people who come together and support and appreciate one another. We want everyone involved to be an advocate for high standards—artists showing the work of other artists they like within the volume and authors doing the same. Then when volume two comes out, the newly selected will help promote their predecessors, and their predecessors will help promote them.

It's an ambitious goal.

A big lesson we learned from this volume is that you can't do this alone. We live in a time where worthy stories are easily lost in the white noise. It's become so difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff, that editing this type of project properly can be a nightmare.

The problem is that good writing is rare. The first thing we focused on when looking through the submissions was to make sure they did not lack the core elements that true authors should possess. We weren't interested in stories with numerous grammar, spelling, and diction errors. It sounds like a simple expectation, but meeting these requirements takes a tremendous amount of hard work and discipline.

Great writing is even rarer. Great writing requires an unwavering dedication that's nearly impossible to describe. We know that readers deserve to experience stories by authors who never give up, who are constantly trying to

improve, and who brush against insanity while perfecting a story. On this level, we see good writing and creativity infused with the author's soul, and that makes it great.

The question may be asked: Why horror? Horror is a beautiful thing. It is an under-worked, under-credited, beautiful thing, and it can damn well be literary. The qualities of craft can shine through horror writing, and we are trying to prove that here. Horror can also trigger strong emotions that other genres don't often consider. Those feelings will have you thinking about the stories long after you've read them.

Even though this is only the first year of Daylight Dims, everything was thought out. Each one of our first-line readers was handpicked because of their unique insight. The artists were chosen because of their desire to be part of this project—the community—and their intensity shows in each piece. The authors share a passion for writing and an interest in the occult. But there are also those who shine through with book design, graphic designs, website creation. It doesn't end there. We've also partnered with audio professionals and narrators to bring you high-quality podcast versions of these stories.

We're grateful for every single person who's helped put this volume together, believed in our mission, and trusted us with their work. This is step one of many, so know that this community will grow. We hope to add on more hands next year, more stories, and more art. Above all, we hope to attract more readers.

Ah, the readers. With all the rambling on about craft, high standards, and community, we haven't forgotten about you—we will never forget the reader. At Daylight Dims, the reader is as important as every hand in the creation process. By picking up this book, you've earned an invitation into our

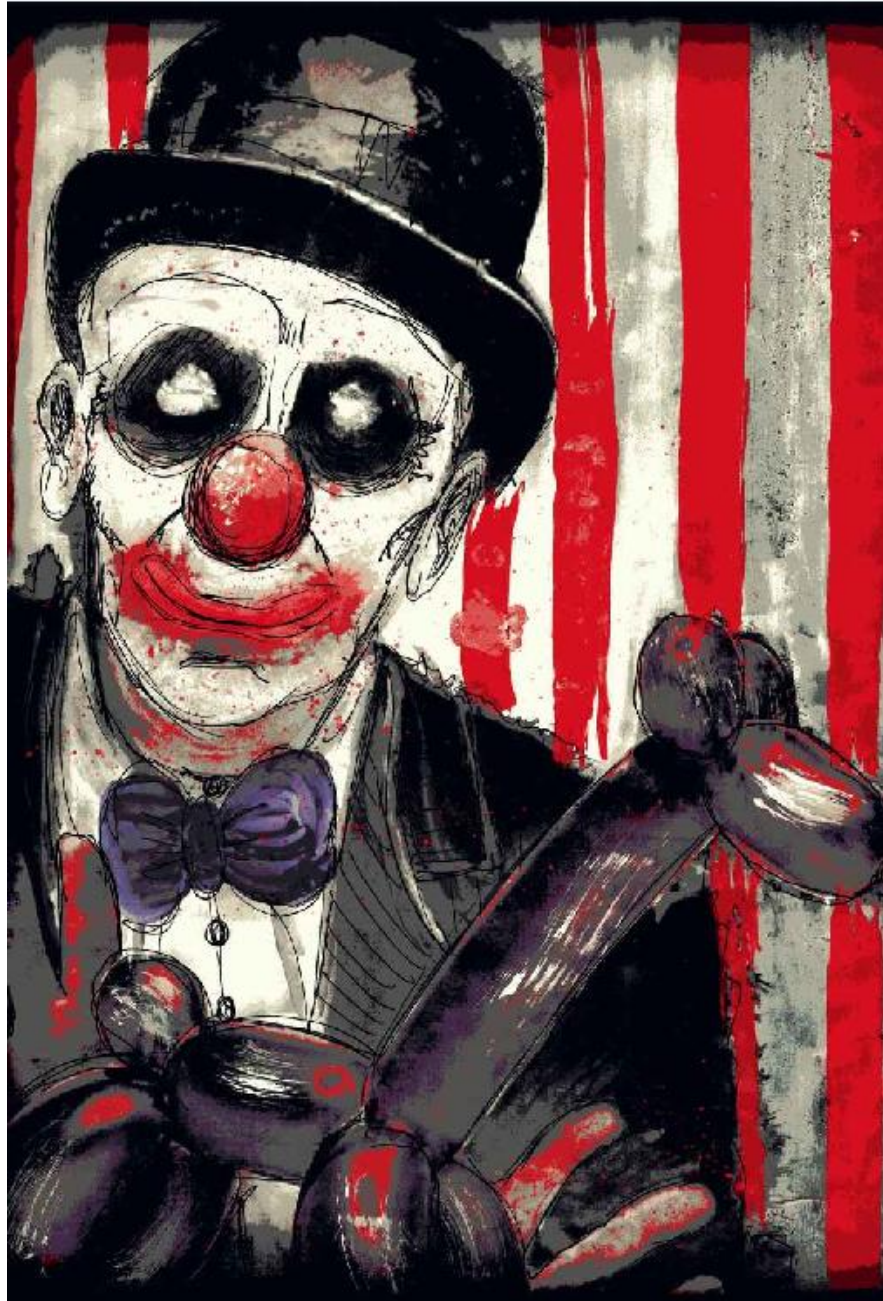
circle. If you like what we are doing, please take the time to share it with others. You hold the power to help us thrive.

Now that you know more about us, here's a cliché closing just for the hell of it: The sun is setting and daylight's dimming. It's time to settle in and experience our world.

Yours truly,

J. W. Zulauf

Kristopher Mallory



EXPLORATION OF ROOM B

ARIC SUNDQUIST

THE CARNIVAL

"What the hell are you looking at?" Brian asked his son.

Samuel stood transfixed at the edge of the crowd, watching a clown stretch a balloon between his fingers. After one quick surge of air from a motorized pump, the clown twisted the balloon into an airplane, then sailed it towards a wide-eyed boy, who caught it triumphantly in a bear hug.

"I suppose you want one," Brian said.

Samuel didn't meet his father's stare. Instead he watched all the kids brandishing swords and dragonflies and top hats. "Yes," he said. "Well...maybe."

"Sorry, kiddo, we're on a budget."

"The balloons are free," the clown said, not looking up from his work. "Does your son like dinosaurs?" He infused a little air and some carnival magic and a red balloon squeaked into a brontosaurus.

"No thanks," Brian said, hands on his hips. "He doesn't need any more junk."

The clown glanced up and smiled, a genuine smile, hidden beneath the makeup. "It's only a balloon." He held the dinosaur in his outstretched hand and shook it a little.

Brian didn't move.

The clown shrugged and handed the dinosaur to a child nearby, then conjured a frog and air-hopped it to a girl with thick glasses.

Anger instantly burned in Brian's chest. He rarely knew what triggered his outbursts, but recognized that familiar feeling flare through him, numbing his body. He tried to keep the anger at bay, but it overwhelmed him and took control. *So much for breathing exercises.*

The clown laughed, seeming to enjoy the spectacle of two kids fencing with balloon swords. He glanced over at Brian, and his real smile vanished inside the red makeup. "You wouldn't hit a clown, now would you?"

The crowd went silent and stared.

Brian clenched his fists in anger. His face grew hot. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, sighed, and grabbed his son away from the spectators, dragging him towards the beer tent. He told himself that he wasn't going to drink around his son anymore. But he needed beer.

He paid ten buck for two beers and chugged the first one in three long gulps. The beer tasted cheap, but he didn't care. At least it was cold. He sipped the second, while watching his son kick an empty cup around in the dirt.

Another clown loomed over the crowd, wobbling on stilts, pretending to lose his balance. He tumbled to the ground and sprang back up. Applause greeted him.

"Thank you, my friends," the stilt-clown declared. "Now, I have free tickets for the House of Horrors." After scanning the crowd, he took three long strides and was inside the beer tent, handing Samuel two slips of paper depicting a lonely house on top of a gothic-looking hill. "Here you go, lad."

Samuel took the tickets and looked up at his dad, hope in his eyes.

Brian ignored him. Instead he stared at a young blonde wearing a tank top. He smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. Then he noticed a few of the people giving him odd looks. "Okay," he said, watching the pretty girl stroll away from the tent, making sure the crowd overheard him. "You can go, Sammy. I'll wait outside."

Samuel was off in an instant.

Brian shouted for him to stop, then ran after, dodging through the crowd, spilling beer on his hands. He downed the last of his drink, threw the cup away, and finally caught up with his son at the front gate. He was about to grab him by the arms and shake some sense into him when a loud voice called out.

"What do we have here?" the announcer asked, twirling a pitchfork. He wore plastic demon horns and red makeup.

“Are those free passes I see?”

“Yes sir,” Samuel said shyly.

The man slid over the ticket gate and stopped in front of Samuel, his face shifting from shock to fear to awe within seconds. “You have something very special,” the announcer said. “For one day only, you get to explore a part of the house that none dare venture!”

Samuel’s mouth dropped open. He peeked at his dad, and then lowered his head. “No, that’s okay. We can just do the normal one.”

The man put his hand on Samuel’s shoulders, regarding him with kind eyes. “Nonsense. You must take the special tour. Trust me...it will change your life.”

Not once did the man look at Brian.

“Now step aside, my friends,” the announcer said, parting the crowd with his pitchfork and walking up the steps. “Let them discover the true secrets of the House of Horrors!”

Brian wanted to wait outside and enjoy the remaining sunshine and stare at women. But the crowd parted, leaving him alone with his son. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the blonde girl watching him, fiddling with one of her hoop earrings. Hopefully she would still be around when he was done.

“Okay,” Brian said under his breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

The announcer tapped his pitchfork on the floor and the door swung open with a loud creak.

They entered the House of Horrors.

DARK RIDE

Darkness everywhere.

Brian noticed his son quivering with fear and excitement. From the floor panels, lights grew in brightness and spread across the tunnel, mimicking an early morning sunrise. Birds sang. Trees rustled in the wind. The scent of pine and flowers filled the air, and before them sat a red Corvette no bigger than a bumper car.

“Look!” Samuel yelled, pointing. He raced over to the passenger side and jumped into the car. Brian followed much slower and entered the vehicle, legs cramped under the steering column.

“Does it start?” Samuel asked.

Brian turned the ignition key, and the sound of an engine rumbled. The car lurched forward on the tracks.

A glowing orb rose near the rafters and lit the tunnel. On both sides, plastic bushes and trees simulated a dense forest. Behind the foliage, murals depicted rural country life: an old barn, a rusty tractor, cattle grazing in a field. Brian wasn’t an artist, never really had the patience for it, but he knew talent when he saw it. Each mural blended seamlessly into the next with exquisite detail, right down to the last autumn leaf, creating the illusion that they were driving, watching the landscape out the window. He inhaled the aroma of fresh cut grass, dandelions, and apple cider. For a brief moment he forgot where he was, taking in the beauty of the pictures—all the sounds and smells.

The murals changed into darker colors, and the trees wilted and became bare, blurring into one long dark streak. The wilderness sounds vanished as they rounded a corner. The sun-orb slipped behind the rafters and was gone.

“Uh oh,” Samuel said, leaning forward. “It’s getting dark out. That’s where the real monsters are, right Dad?”

“There aren’t any real monsters, Sammy. Just pretend ones.”

A bridge constructed of concrete slabs spanned a river before them. In the low light, Brian could see fake grass and a pool of water with goldfish and lily pads. A bubbler underneath the bridge simulated a river current. After they crossed the bridge, the sounds of crickets and water grew softer.

Suddenly, the car jerked. Samuel grabbed the dashboard with both hands and was about to ask what happened when the car jumped again, followed by a strange chugging noise. A warning light blinked on the dashboard.

Out of fuel.

The car lurched forward again.

Brian was about to say how that type of scenario always happened in horror movies, but he stopped himself short. He had to give the carnival credit. The ride wasn't what he expected. He had gone through enough funhouses growing up to know that they were nothing but mirrors, smoke machines, and torture chambers. This ride wasn't like that at all. Here a plot seemed to be forming.

Samuel stared up at him—half in pure joy, half in terror. Then he pointed to a sign on the side of the road. "Look!"

The sign read: The Lovecraft Inn.

"Are we going to walk now?" Samuel asked.

"Looks like it."

Brian hopped out first, then turned to see Samuel copy his movements. They stood side-by-side, arms crossed.

"Is this what happens in real horror movies?" Samuel asked.

"Haven't you ever seen a horror movie?"

"No. Mom won't let me."

Brian's ex-wife, Catherine, was strict concerning Samuel's upbringing. They had many disagreements during their short marriage. Brian was ten years older than her and grew up in a time when boys didn't wear bike helmets or knee pads. They fell out of trees, cut fingers with pocketknives, and baited their own fishing hooks. Catherine was the

opposite. She wanted to do everything for her son, nurture him like an infant. Brian always thought that boys needed to learn how to react to situations. They needed to jump into the middle of things and learn how to climb their way out, maybe with a few bruises and a little bit of wisdom thrown in for good measure. Thinking about it made him angry. He wanted his son to be confident, like him.

"Yup," he answered Samuel. "They always run out of gas. And then they have to walk to a nearby phone or stay the night in a creepy hotel."

"What about cell phones?"

"They're too far out in the country to use cell phones, or they forget their charger at home."

"Oh. And then what happens?"

Brian lost his patience. "For Christ's sake, Sammy. Don't you want to see for yourself, or do you want me to spoil everything?"

Samuel hung his head.

They walked down the rest of the tunnel made to look like a barren road, with plastic trees, a guardrail, and a fake full moon. Brian grabbed a branch and plucked a rubber pinecone. The tunnel came to an end, but there was a trail off to the side, so they forged on, pushing through tangled foliage and spider webs.

The sound of rattling chains filled the air.

THE CEMETERY

Brian and Samuel came to some trees at the end of the trail. They pushed their way through and stepped into a clearing. A dozen gravestones jutted from the ground. Some of the graves were dug up, with mounds of dirt and shovels stuck into the soil. Bones littered the area in massive piles.

"I wouldn't get too close to the bones," a voice said. A man shambled out from the woods dressed like a priest, with a long black coat and a cross dangling from his neck. "The undead get restless this time of night. Are you folks looking for the inn?"

"Yes," Samuel said, playing along. "Our car broke down on the road. Actually, we ran out of gas."

The priest appeared to regard them thoughtfully. "It's not a good night to be wandering about. Don't you know that this graveyard is cursed? Every night the skeletons rise from their graves to look for their lost pirate treasure. It's not safe here."

"Then why are you here?" Samuel asked.

"Why aren't you a smart lad!" the man remarked. "To answer your question, I was hired by the inn to break this curse. It's not good for business to have a haunted graveyard so close by."

Rattling chains echoed again.

"The skeletons have awakened!" the man shouted. "Hurry! Run to the front gate!"

Three skeletons rose from behind the gravestones, shaking their chains and holding plastic swords. Although the makeup and costumes were a little generic, their movements were honed to perfection. From the look on Samuel's face, they obviously scared him out of his mind. Brian shook his head.

The priest led them to the edge of the graveyard. Three skeletons stood in front of the main gate. With Samuel on the verge of tears, the skeletons kept their distance.

“We have to find their gold!” the priest said, pointing to a tree stump. He grabbed a sword from the ground next to a severed skeleton hand. “You should help!” he said to Brian. “There’s gold hidden everywhere!”

“No, thanks,” Brian answered, slipping his hands in his pockets. “I’m just a spectator today.”

The priest nodded and jumped into battle, fending off the attack.

Samuel got on hands and knees and stuck his head inside various stumps. He seemed to be having fun, but Brian couldn’t tell for sure.

“Got it!” Samuel said, pulling out a cloth sack. He ran back to the priest and handed over the pirate gold.

The priest set the sack down and backed up, putting a shielding arm around Samuel, holding up his cross for divine protection.

One of the skeletons shambled closer, grabbed the loot, then turned and headed back into the artificial night. Right before the skeleton disappeared, it stuck its hand inside the sack and set down a handful of loot on a gravestone.

The priest motioned for Samuel to take a look.

Samuel crept over, carefully, watching each step. He grabbed the coins and ran back to the priest.

His prize was a dozen chocolate coins.

“Well done,” the priest said. “The skeletons have accepted you as one of their own. You may pass freely through the cemetery.”

The iron gates to the cemetery creaked open, and Brian led his son up the towering steps to the door of the inn. Samuel turned around and waved at the priest below. The man waved back and then set about prepping the area for the next round of visitors.

“What now?” Samuel asked.

Brian felt embarrassed about his son coming so close to tears. If he were Samuel’s age, he would have slugged the

skeletons and taken the candy himself. "I don't know, Sammy," he said. "Try knocking."

Samuel nodded and knocked. The door swung open to reveal a large room that looked like a hotel lobby from the forties. Across the room sat old leather furniture, an oak desk, and a chandelier.

"Welcome to the Lovecraft Inn," a deep voice said.

TWO STRANGE PAINTINGS

The moment Brian entered, he felt a draft. He followed the bellhop—a tall man with hooded eyelids, a hunched back, and a red coat.

“Feel that?” Brian asked, holding out his hand.

Samuel instantly stepped to his father’s side, holding out his hand in imitation. Brian saw him searching for the source of the draft, stopping next to a picture of an old schooner on the wall. The hull splashed through rough ocean water.

“I think I can hear waves,” Samuel said, sticking his ear closer. “Yup, I can!” He walked to the next picture: a stone maze with a monster huddled in the shadows and eyes glowing like burning coals. “I hear growling!” he said, putting his head close. “Dad, come listen!”

Before Brian could answer, a door flung open and a young couple raced out. Brian smelled alcohol on them from ten feet away. He wanted another drink.

The girl was maybe sixteen, tall and skinny, and wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. She gave one look at Samuel and her face lit up. “Don’t go in the closet,” she said, laughing. “It’s scary in there!” She hopped on her boyfriend’s back and he raced her through the exit.

“This inn has many secrets,” the bellhop said. “Closets can lead to secret passageways. Beds can lead to magic portals. Be very careful about where you set foot, and look in every corner.”

Samuel stared up at the large man in fear. The bellhop grinned.

“You have nothing to be afraid of,” he said to Samuel. “Those of good heart will always triumph over the wicked. You are very brave to have ventured so far.” He handed Samuel a green glow stick. “In case you get curious and decide to do some exploring, this light will protect you from the ghosts haunting the inn.”

Samuel handled the glow stick with an expression of awe.

Brian thought the bellhop's words were overdramatic. But he saw something change in his son, just for a second. Samuel stood more erect, as if a small seed of courage rose to the surface. It was strange how a simple gesture from a complete stranger could alter his son's demeanor. The idea of a drink fell from his mind.

"You must sign the guest log," the bellhop said to Brian. "Then I can show you to your lodgings. We have a raffle and send free passes in the mail, so enter all your contact info."

Brian sighed, growing even more impatient. He grabbed the pen and wrote down the information.

"Come now," the bellhop said. "Your room awaits."

THE CLOSET

"You want to go in with me?" Samuel asked, peeking into the closet and moving over some old clothing on hangers. After the bellhop left, they began hearing a ghostly cackling noise.

"This is your adventure," Brian said. "What do you want to do?"

"I think we should go and see. Do you want to go in first, Dad?"

Another sound came from the closet, voices wailing like banshees. Samuel jumped. "There's something in there!"

Brian shook his head in exasperation. He rushed over and pulled the closet door all the way open. A long hallway stretched before them. The walls were decorated to look like ancient concrete slabs. It tunneled for at least twenty feet, disappearing into unknown darkness.

"Let's see that glow stick," Brian said, trying to hurry along. Samuel handed it to him and Brian cracked it, showing his son how the fluid inside mixed and brightened. He unraveled the string and placed it around Samuel's neck.

"There, you're all set for exploring. Let's go."

They walked through the hallway, veering right and left, and went down a staircase. New sounds emanated from beyond similar to a large animal bellowing out in anger.

"I'm scared, Dad," Samuel said.

"Why?" he answered, pushing his son forward. "It's not real. You have to toughen up a little."

"I know, but..."

They came to a room with two hallways on each side. A doorway stood in front of them, barricaded by a metal gate, ivy vines entwined around the metal. Lit candles illuminated all four corners of the room, highlighting the strange writings scrawled on the floor.

One phrase said: Beware the Minotaur.

A noise sounded from the hallway behind them. Brian glanced back as a secret door swung open and a figure emerged.

From all directions, ghosts drew nearer.

Once the apparitions closed in, Brian could see they were dressed in old Victorian garb and covered with webs, faces painted white.

"Why do you disturb us?" one of the ghosts demanded.

Samuel practically stood on Brian's feet. "What should we say, Dad?"

"Tell them we're lost and trying to find our way out."

Samuel took a deep breath and stepped towards the ghost. "We're lost and trying to find our way out. Oh...and sorry we woke you up from your nap."

The ghost on the left laughed.

"For this intrusion," the ghost in the right hallway said, "you must pay with your immortal souls." The young man stepped forward and entered the light of the glow stick. He gave a wide-eyed look and began convulsing and twitching. The young actor, Brian realized, was having a blast performing his routine.

"Oh no!" the trapped ghost wailed, holding out his arms for help.

"The light!" said another.

"He's trapped!"

"Yes, it's true," the captured ghost said, in defeat. "I'm now under your command. I must help you in order to regain my soul. You carry powerful magic, my friend."

Samuel looked down at the glow stick dangling from around his neck as if seeing it for the first time.

"Now, there is only one way out of this chamber," the ghost continued, "and that is through the Tunnel of Terror. You must brave the labyrinth and outsmart the Minotaur. I'll show you where to go. But your traveling companion must stay behind. The Minotaur can smell grownups from miles away."

The young ghost grinned at Brian, then led Samuel to the gated doorway. He lifted a secret latch and they entered. The door clicked shut behind them.

Brian was about to head back to the front desk and wait when one of the other ghosts walked up to him. He was an older man with a shaved head and massive shoulders.

"We'll be getting more people through here soon," he said. "I'll show you where to meet your son."

Brian nodded and followed. They walked halfway down the hall to the left, where the ghost pushed a hidden button and the wall swung open. Inside the small room sat a table and chairs, a deck of cards, and a small handheld radio. The air smelled like cigarettes. The man grabbed the radio and opened another door leading to a metal staircase. Brian followed the man to another door at the bottom of the stairs. Once inside, light flooded over him.

Security monitors sat along the walls. On one of the screens, Brian saw the skeleton graveyard and a group of kids running around like mad, searching for lost pirate loot. Another camera above the receptionist's desk showed the bellhop leaning against the wall and adjusting his tie. Then Brian saw Samuel in the maze, twisting through various corridors, jabbering on about something with the ghost. Suddenly the Minotaur rounded a corner, beating his chest in a deadly challenge.

"Let's listen in," the man said. He clicked on the mouse and roars came from the speakers.

On the screen, Samuel ran away from the Minotaur. Right as he was about to get captured, his ghost companion stuck out his foot and tripped the monster. The creature stumbled and pretended to stub its toe, wailing in pain.

Samuel laughed uncontrollably.

The man smiled and clicked the sound back off.

Various cameras showed other parts of the tour, the bridge, the tunnel, and a haunted boat-no doubt an

attraction to get the kids to come back and try a different route.

"See there," the man said, pointing to another monitor. Brian thought the room looked like a laboratory of some kind.

"What's in that one?" Brian asked.

"That's an exhibit for our older crowd. Wanna go take a look? There're some neat things in there. Most of it's real."

"Don't you have to get back to scaring the shit out of people?"

"My shift's over, anyway." He lit up a cigarette, inhaled deeply, then used the radio to verify his position was filled. "There. That's settled. Let's go."

They walked past the monitor station to another door leading to an ancient elevator. Brian wanted to protest but realized he didn't have much of a choice. He was lost in the underground maze. He would have to backtrack all the way to the inn, and from there, go out the exit like the young couple.

"Did you know that this carnival is built over an ancient sacrificial chamber?"

"Really?" Brian laughed. "Or is that part of the act?"

The man smiled, showing stained teeth from coffee and cigarettes. "Not at all. The townsfolk used to perform all kinds of rituals and sacrifices here."

The man singled out an old key from his chain and twisted it inside the door, engaging the elevator. They entered and he swung the front gate shut. The man hit the bottom button, labeled "Room B."

"It's true," he continued. "Look it up if you don't believe me."

Gears and motors shrieked and bellowed. Moments later, the elevator doors opened to the basement floor where Brian stepped into a true horror scene.

ROOM B

A shelf full of jars drew Brian's attention. The room held typical carnival oddities, deformed cows, horses, and other animals he didn't recognize.

"This is crazy," Brian said, reading the labels. "These are real?"

"Sure are. One of them even has a human inside." The man pointed to a jar with a fetus preserved in formaldehyde.

"Is that even legal?"

"Probably not. Don't know where it came from either. Nazis used to do all sorts of crazy shit during the war, and I think some of this is from then. Some of their officers would throw infants up in the air and shoot 'em down like clay pigeons. Sick stuff, if you ask me."

They walked past the row of vats and jars and stopped near the torture devices. Detailed notes and directions were displayed on the wall next to each.

The first contraption resembled an upright coffin with a heavy iron lid. The diagram showed that it worked by strapping the victim inside, allowing the nails lining the door to impale the body. Brian stared at the two spikes placed where the person's eyes would be. The sign above the diagram read: Iron Maiden.

The Rack followed: A horizontal bed with wooden rollers, ropes, and metal hooks. Once a victim was tied up hand and foot, appendages were stretched out in all four directions, dislocating and breaking every bone. That by itself didn't cause death. Tongs, shears, and various blades rested on a table next to the device.

Finally, The Wheel. It looked normal enough, like a large wagon wheel. But once tied down to the spokes, every bone was broken along the arms and legs with a hammer. The inscription said that the machine caused appendages to become shapeless mush afterwards. Then the limbs were

braided into the spokes and the victim was left outside for the crows to feast upon.

Smaller, handheld torture gadgets littered the area, but Brian didn't want to see the rest. A knot formed in his stomach and his head swam. He had never seen those kinds of things up close.

"What's the matter?" the man asked. "Not feeling well?"

"I'm all right."

The man nodded his head, slowly. "Looks like you need to toughen up a little."

Brian laughed, but it came forced.

"One last thing I want to show you," the man said. "It's part of the old exhibit."

"No, that's okay. I should be getting back. Sammy's probably waiting."

The man jiggled his keys in his pocket, a reminder that the elevator couldn't operate without him. "There's a waiting room for the kids to play games and win prizes. It's fun. He'll be busy for awhile."

"Okay. But let's make it quick."

The man unlocked another door and they walked into a large chamber resembling a cave entrance. He flicked on some floodlights and Brian stared in awe at a fathomless pit. A small rock peninsula stretched over the chasm, holding an altar chiseled from what looked like marble. The altar held exquisitely detailed etches of runes and symbols. Brian couldn't even begin to understand them.

"This can't be real," Brian said.

"It is, my friend." The man walked over to the altar and motioned with his cigarette. "This is where the sacrifices were brought. The pit is hundreds of feet deep. There's an underground lake down there. Good way to dispose of the evidence, don't you think?"

"When did this happen?" Brian asked.

"Don't know for sure. Maybe a hundred years ago. The townspeople didn't like to kill their own folk, you see, so

they'd find strangers instead, mostly sailors and drifters. And then they'd trick them into coming down here and strap them down to the altar. Hooks were inserted into their hands and feet and they were dangled like a puppet in the air. It took hours to die, sometimes even days. But you know what? The bodies always went missing."

Brian nodded, staring down the hole. He thought he heard something from deep within, some sort of breathing, like when you hold a seashell up to your ear.

"So, something took them?" Brian asked. "Is that what you're saying?"

"They're just rumors, that's all. Maybe they bled to death or the weight was enough to tear them free. But I do know the sacrifices were meant for something living deep within the lake."

Brian stared into the blackness, then glanced upward, as if looking for some sort of heavenly presence. He saw stalactites jutting out like thick lances and old ropes and pulleys bolted to support beams. He was about to ask another question, when he noticed the man staring back at him.

"Personally," the man said, "if I hated someone enough, say...some cocky asshole who treats his little boy like shit...then I'd trick him down here and put him through those torture devices first, just for fun. But that's just me. Then I'd string him up with those hooks and watch him squirm. Maybe I'd piss on his head. But again, that's just me."

The man began walking forward, his massive shoulders hunched like a bull about to charge, slowly pressing Brian back to the precipice. He was about to say something but stopped when the man cracked his knuckles. It sounded like a string of firecrackers bursting.

Brian decided to keep his mouth shut.

"You met Benny, right?" the man asked, staring directly into Brian's eyes. "The balloon guy?"

“I think so, yes.”

“Last year he found a man behind one of the booths molesting a six-year-old girl. He brought him down here and strapped him to The Wheel and pounded out every limb until they were mush, and then twisted the fucker into a giraffe. But for some reason it didn’t come out quite right, so Benny’s been looking for someone else to practice on.” The man poked Brian’s chest with his finger, hard. “I would be careful if I were you. I think you pissed him off earlier.”

Brian realized his hands trembled. He stuck them in his pockets and stared down at his feet.

“Now, just so we’re clear,” the man said, “we have your name and address. We’ll be checking in, from time to time. If you keep treating your son like shit, you’ll be seeing us again down here. And it won’t be pretty.”

Brian nodded, the message was clear.

The man smiled and went back to his normal demeanor. He even patted Brian’s back like they were old chums. “Good. So glad you liked our tour. Now watch your step and come back again and see us real soon.”

NIGHT DESCENDS

Brian felt dazed by the time they reached the elevator. He didn't say a word the whole ride up. The elevator came to a halt and the man threw open the doors.

"You're wrong about what you told your son," he said. "There are monsters in the world, real ones. It's your job to teach him how to overcome them. That's what fathers do."

Brian nodded in agreement. He stepped out of the elevator and the man slammed the door shut. Old gears shrieked and rattled. Brian listened until it vanished, then made his way down the hallway to an open room. He spotted Samuel with a group of kids chatting about their adventures.

Brian walked up and put his hand on Samuel's shoulder. "You okay, kiddo? Having fun?"

"Yup, I am! There was a Minotaur that chased us all over. You should have seen it! And they have a secret room with a dunk tank, too! I hit the bulls-eye and the clown fell in." Samuel laughed. "He said I threw like a girl, but then he changed his mind when I hit the button."

"Sounds like fun, Sammy."

"Where did you go?"

"The carnival people wanted to show me something, that's all."

"Like what?"

"It's nothing. Just some stuff in the basement."

Samuel's interest peaked. "Really? Can I see?"

"I don't think so. It's not for kids."

Samuel nodded.

"You ready to go?"

Samuel hefted up his gift bag full of candy, balloons, and zombie stickers. They walked outside.

The same announcer sat hunched on top of the roof like a gargoyle, shouting over the crowd, daring them to enter the House of Horrors. Brian didn't look. They walked past the

beer tent where the blonde girl stirred a drink. Their eyes met, but he didn't smile at her this time. He held Samuel's hand and continued onward.

"Free balloon animals!" a familiar voice called out.

"You want one?" Brian asked his son.

"For real?"

"Yup. Go get one."

Samuel ran up to the stand while Brian waited. The stilt-clown walked past with a crowd of kids swirling around him like they were planets in orbit. The clown threw out candy and laughed as the kids cheered and chased after it. Brian didn't look him in the eyes. Instead, he watched his son hopping up and down in line. Then Samuel was back, brandishing his new weapon.

"It's a sword!" he shouted. "See? It's for fighting the Minotaur!"

"I see it. That's pretty cool."

"He made one for you, too, Dad."

Without looking, Brian knew it was a giraffe. He told Samuel that he could keep them both. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the clown waving to him. He waved back, mostly over his shoulder, trying his hardest to be nonchalant.

As they walked back through the parking lot, Brian stopped and glanced behind him at all the tents and neon lights. He inhaled the smell of cotton candy, hot dogs, and other carnival food. The sun began to set and the wind felt colder. He buttoned up his jacket and noticed the shadows from the carnival signs stretching towards them like uncurling fingers. Instinctively, he put his arm around Samuel and held him tightly.

And then it was night.



NIGHTMARE BIRD TAKES FLIGHT

MIKE PHILLIPS

Nightmare Bird flew from her perch, ready for tragedy to begin. In the distance, the last rays of the setting sun faded to black. Many hours remained before the blushing flames of dawn would rise from the ashes of night, for this was the winter solstice, a time for all the monsters of the world to make a sacrifice, a time for murder.

Around Nightmare Bird, the trees had long since shed their summer flesh. The great oaks of the forest could do little more than rattle in protest of wicked deeds to come. Even the moon hid, taking shelter from the most terrible of nights, fated to show but a sliver of its true self while evil mastered the land.

As she swept through the trees, her keen eyes attuned to the growing shades amidst the gloom, she searched for prey. The innocents would soon be taking shelter, hiding until it was safe for them to appear in their doorways once more. Nightmare Bird hunted for the sweetest meat for her sacrifice.

Spreading her broad wings, feathers black as the deepest pit, she followed the paths the humans walked. Nightmare Bird plunged towards a flicker of movement—perhaps a woodsman collecting his tools, or a housewife drawing a bucket of water from a well. Gathering speed, she fell into the shadows of a fir, towards the darkened forest floor.

Whack!

Nightmare Bird's beak sunk deep into a piece of wood, her head jarred by the force of the blow. She tossed from side to side like a squirrel in a dog's mouth but could do nothing to break free. Lashing out with her claws, she struck the hand of whatever creature held the giant wooden club.

"Let go," a slow, ponderous voice said. Nightmare Bird immediately placed the owner: Harold Beast, known to his acquaintances as Harry. The creature stood as tall as a house and nearly as broad in the shoulders, and was aptly named for the coat of hair that covered his enormous body. Harry Beast mumbled something unintelligible, apparently trying to fully understand what had just happened, and then said, "Mine." He spoke in the language only monsters could understand, sounding to human ears like an ancient tree falling to a woodman's axe.

Harry Beast lowered the club to the ground as he sat, the heavy end driving Nightmare Bird's face into the dirt.

"Stop! Stop! Stop! It's me," Nightmare Bird managed to shout, her beak still wedged deep into the wood. "Let me go, won't you?"

At the sound of her voice, Harry Beast drew the club nearer.

"Birdie, birdie?" Harry Beast squinted.

"Yes, it's me. Free my beak, if you please?"

"Stick," Harry Beast agreed. "Nose."

With brutal efficiency, Harry Beast wrested the bird free. He sat back and looked to the sky. "Dark Night," he said ponderously, seeming sad and defeated.

Feeling for cracks in her beak, Nightmare Bird said, "Yes, and a glorious one it is for a sacrifice. I feel the very stars above aligning in my favor. Something will happen this night, mark my words—something unpredictable, something to please all the devils to which our service is owed."

"Share?"

Nightmare Bird and Harry Beast had a long history together. Their enemies were many, and Harry Beast had at

one time protected her eggs from harm. In the depths of winter, they often shared a kill. There was no shame for monsters to work together on Dark Night of all nights, not if one could secure a greater share of the spoils.

“Yes, a fine idea. Your talents will be of use to me, as there are rugged broods about.”

Laughing, Harry Beast slapped Nightmare Bird on the back. “Where?” he said, scratching his head.

“Ah, yes. I have only just begun my search. Lucky for you, I have some skill in The Sight. It shouldn’t prove too much trouble for us to find a victim.”

“You needs skunk magic,” said a gruff voice. To humans it would have sounded like the rolling of stones down a mountainside, for it too was spoken in the language of monsters.

A pair of goblins emerged from the shadows. They looked like overgrown toads on two legs. Puttygut and Thudrott, both monsters usually employed in the stealing of pies from windowsills, rummaging in refuse heaps, or selling worthless bits of nothing to creatures who just wanted them to go away.

The goblins each wore a thick leather apron adorned with bits of metal. Atop their head, they used broken pots as helmets. Thudrott, the bigger of the two, held a skunk tightly in his hands. The animal thrashed like mad, but accomplished naught to free itself.

If Nightmare Bird’s nose were any judge, the skunk had already used all of its best defenses against the goblins. They stank horribly, even worse than usual. She couldn’t fathom how the goblins snuck up on them, smelling as they did.

“Aye, like wormies in cow pooh,” Thudrott said, the statement seeming to explain everything. “Ain’t nuffin’ better what’s a skunk’s magic can do, on account of they’s so close to the earth.”

Appalled, Nightmare Bird said, "No, thank you. We are quite satisfied with enchanting a pool of water. Yes, that's it. The miller's pond is close by, just a flight of fancy if you take my meaning. We'll have our stratagems laid before the hour is nigh."

"Not so," said Puttygut. "Look up, Lady Nightmare Bird. When the moon comes out from behin' the clouds, you see it don't gots the power. New moons fer some and full fer others, my old ma used to say. You needs to spellbind our skunk if you wants to find a sacrifice. We need each other."

"Oh? If you know so much about this, then why don't you do the enchantment yourself?" Nightmare Bird said, aware of Puttygut's knowledge of the Enchanted Arts, an art taught by his folk long ago.

Puttygut snatched a louse from under his arm, squished it between his fingers, and licked the juice. "That's 'cause no one can do it like yous can. Nightmare Bird is the Queen of the Monsters, the wickedest of us alls. Thudrott and me knows we's better off hitchin' our wagon to yours if'n we wants to make our sacrifice more than somethin' special."

The flattery worked. Blood heated Nightmare Bird's neck, for she knew it to be true.

Not to deny her devoted followers, she said, "Yes, well then, bring your present to me. We shall all make this but the first of our offerings. Such loyalty shall not be left wanting."

"Mayn't I be the ones what get the honors?" asked Thudrott, holding up the struggling skunk.

"By permission, Yer Ladyship," added Puttygut with a bow.

Nightmare Bird nodded. A moment later-the heinous deed done, the ritual performed-the group of monsters stood over the splayed skunk.

"Look there. A most worthy sacrifice will be made this night. Dark and wicked deeds will be carried out, and great evil will be rewarded," Nightmare Bird announced, picking over ropes of gut.

“By the warts on my arse, there’s more to it,” said Puttygut. “Somethin’s not right, Yer Ladyship. I jus’ can’t figure what it is.”

“What? You come to me on Dark Night, begging a portion of my sacrifice, and then dare challenge my prediction?” Indignantly, Nightmare Bird folded her wings over her chest and turned away from the skunk.

“No, no. It’s jus’ as you says. Evil given fer evil deeds, the likes o’ which ‘aven’t been done for ages. That’s how I reads it. That twist in the liver’s what bothers me.”

“Liver, really? There’s goblin foretelling for you, I suppose. The liver has never been of any importance as far as I have ever heard.” Nightmare Bird turned back. “A twist at the end, that’s what’s got you all in a dither? Shall the forces of light and darkness ever tremble?”

“No needs tah make fun, Queen Nightmare,” said Puttygut, fawning. “Only a bit o’ somethin’ I once picked up from meh old grandsire.”

“Yes, well, what does your eminent grandsire have to say about the location? Hmmm?” Nightmare Bird stood waiting, tapping her foot.

Finally, Puttygut gave his answer. “I’m not certain,” he whispered.

“What’s that?” Nightmare Bird asked in mockery. “Not certain, did you say?”

“Thought I saw a pit ‘s all. A deep pit what da victim falls into.”

“That’s all, really? So very helpful, this information of yours. My congratulations to your forbears for producing such an invaluable Seer. They must be proud.”

Puttygut lowered his head.

Prodding through the intestines once more, Nightmare Bird continued, “At the crook of the river, by a high cliff wall, that is where the sacrifice will take place. We will find our victim on the road.” Looking from monster to monster, she

added, "That was a little more to the point, don't you think?"

Before Puttygut could reply, Thudrott slugged his shoulder, saying, "We jus' lowly worms to what greatness you possess, Lady Nightmare. Sorry to offend. We's but your 'umblest servants."

"Indeed. Now, shall this motley bunch be on its way? There's work to be done."

About to launch herself into the sky, Nightmare Bird stopped short from a terrible crashing in the undergrowth. She turned to see Harry Beast breaking through a branch as thick as a man's arm to keep up. "Don't go," he said. "Don't mad."

"By all the blood and bile, you knows yous the wickedest monster in this here woods," Thudrott said, his teeth sinking deep into the skunk's lung, ripping pink shreds loose. A long, green tongue licked the outside of his mouth after he greedily swallowed. "Puttygut's good and sorry, ain't ya', Putty?"

"Oh, yes. Good and sorry. I di'n't know whats I was sayin'. We're proud and 'umbled to be with you and that's fact."

The pledges touched her vanity. "All right, then. We will each have our part to play, I expect."

The night appeared to be on their side, helping the monsters pass unseen through the forest. They traveled as shadows in the night, illusory, imaginary things existing only in the darkest fears of children. Creeping, the monsters made their way towards the road. The skeletal fingers of surrounding trees raked their flesh, while thorn bushes needled them. But nothing would keep them from their duty of sacrificing on Dark Night.

Pushing through the brush and brambles, they came to a road made of hard-packed earth. Though rough and imperfect as its creators, the road served its purpose well enough.

“Looooook,” said the sharp-eyed Thudrott, pointing a gnarled finger into the distance.

Nightmare Bird spotted a pinpoint of light, a starlight prick amid the gloom. The road before them snaked between the trees. They waited, watching the light fade and reappear and fade once more.

“Headed towards the river,” said Thudrott. “Wyvern’s toenails, we’s lucky to have you with us, Nightmare Bird.”

“Looks to me like a lantern the humans use to light their way in the dark,” Nightmare Bird said, her head lifted in pride.

“Yes, things is lookin’ good,” Puttygut said. “I says we follow.”

“Keep your distance. Go as quietly as you can. There must be a reason for such a great sacrifice. Perhaps we have a priest or a great warrior ahead of us. Think of the reward we’ll receive.”

“Fly?” asked Harry Beast, his shaggy hand held over his brow.

“Aye, now if it ain’t a noggin’ busta there,” agreed Thudrott. “What if you gets ahead of ‘em, real sneaky like, and we pinch ‘em between us.”

Contemplating the situation, Nightmare Bird said, “No, no. My reputation has spread far and wide. The folk of this wood expect danger from above. If indeed it is a warrior, then he may have a bow or spear, and if he spots me in the sky there would be nowhere to go. I would be done for.”

“Yes,” Puttygut agreed. “We’ll get ‘im the ol’ fashion’ way.”

The group of monsters followed the light, using the wind that sang through the tops of trees to cover any sounds that could alarm the victim of their presence. They drew nearer.

By the time the monsters caught up to the light, they found a little girl, maybe ten years of age, sitting on an old stump beside the road. A fur lined cloak wrapped around her body, the hood pushed back to reveal long strands of silver hair, and a jewel gleamed in the brooch at her throat. She

set the lantern on the ground and rummaged through the contents of the basket she carried.

Taking a deep breath, Nightmare Bird recognized the scent of a spermaceti candle, an item valued highly amongst the wicked creatures of the underworld. The girl must be of noble birth, definitely a trophy worth taking, a prize not to be shared.

The guise of fealty intact, Nightmare Bird nodded to the others. One by one, they spread around the girl, waiting for the sign to be given. Patiently, Nightmare Bird waited for the goblins to block the girl's escape.

A blinding flash lit the forest, followed by a crack as loud as thunder.

Putrid smoke billowed from the ground. A man appeared in the center of the road, only steps away from the girl. The red lining of a black cape flashed as he flung it carelessly behind him, then he lifted his arms over his head in parody of flight.

"I want to suck your blood," he announced with the expected accent and cadence.

After a cry of terror, the girl jumped to her feet and ran, lantern in hand, leaving the basket by the stump. The man ignored the girl and laughed, seemingly unconcerned.

"Have I thwarted thy evil purposes?" the man asked Nightmare Bird, turning to face her, unaffected by her arts of concealment. He made a deep bow, hand sweeping dramatically before him. Returning to his full height, he gave a winning smile, displaying the appropriate dental peculiarities. "If you fail to make sacrifice to your silly demon this night, will you become any less divine a creature?"

"Why, good evening, Cornelius," said Nightmare Bird, fluttering a wingtip before an anxious brow. Under her feathers, she blushed. "What brings you out on Dark Night? You owe no debt of honor."

"Indeed not, but I hate to miss a good show."

Cornelius gasped as if pained and grabbed at his chest. Nightmare Bird watched, surprised, for the pointed end of a branch stuck from the vampire's chest.

"Stop that!" shouted Nightmare Bird at the goblins behind Cornelius.

"He killed our mama!" Puttygut whined, twisting the branch in the wound.

"Now!" growled Nightmare Bird, red eyes burning fiercely.

Puttygut climbed down from his brother's shoulders and disappeared into the forest.

Reaching behind him, Cornelius pulled the branch from his chest. The gash closed instantly. He dropped the stick and gave the outstretched tip of Nightmare Bird's wing a kiss.

"My, my, Cornelius. You have come only in the nick of time. We could surely use your talents on this fine Dark Night."

"Bad man," said Harry Beast, appearing from the opposite direction Nightmare Bird thought he had gone.

"Yeah, what do we want with the likes of 'im?" asked Thudrott from the shadows.

"Dark Night is for real monsterin'," Puttygut agreed.

"You will get along or all of you will be on your own. There will be enough for everyone if we cooperate," Nightmare Bird said, looking to the goblins.

Fastidiously cleaning a leaf from his shirt, though unperturbed by the gaping tear the branch had left, Cornelius said, "Rest assured, I am only here to watch the proceedings, a bit of theatre. Rituals of the most terrible ilk have been an interest of mine for many a year."

"Whad he say?" asked Thudrott.

"Bad man," warned Harry Beast.

"Says he won't get in da way," Puttygut replied. "And he better not, or my aim won't miss nex' time."

"Stop arguing, and let us go," said Nightmare Bird. "Time's wasting. If our quarry escapes, there may be no other."

Using the most practiced arts they possessed, they went silently as moths in the treetops, invisible as stars among stars.

As they stalked, they used a monster's greatest weapon: fear. Nightmare Bird, like all monsters, thrived on the pursuit and fed upon the victim's unease. The fear that exuded from a child stumbling through the woods, lost, thrilled her.

Closer to the river where the sound of water rushed over stones, the path split in two. They stopped to examine the ground.

"Smelly, smelly," said Harry Beast sniffing the air. "Bad way. Saw."

"What's that?" asked Nightmare Bird, sensing nothing.

"Saw bad. Go smelly."

"What with the skunk guts pointin' that way and all, the little tyke there ain't runnin' right," Thudrott explained.

"What are those two jabbing about?" Nightmare Bird said. "We don't want to raise alarm."

"That's jus' it," Puttygut said. "I thinks the Beast is sayin' the girl's is headed towards the sawmill, but the cliffs is in the other way."

"Toad's teeth, that's just what I said," Thudrott replied indignantly.

"If that indeed is where the child's gone, we shall never catch her before she finds the aid she seeks," Cornelius said. "I shall be off. Go towards the cliffs and I will flush out the victim. Fear not, I cannot fail."

"No way," said Thudrott, breaking a stick in his hand. "Ain't no way yous gonna take our sacrifice."

"Yeah, I trus' him 'bout as far as I can toss ol' big and hairy," Puttygut agreed, jerking his thumb towards Harry Beast.

"Bad. Man, bad. No," said Harry Beast.

"Oh, all right, I'll go. Off to the cliff face, now the rest of you. I'll meet you there in a trice. Be ready. This

arrangement becomes a worse idea as the night wears on, but I made a bargain, and I'll stick by it."

Nightmare Bird reigned supreme as she soared above the treetops. Nothing could stop her. She considered how to take the girl all for herself. It would be the easiest thing to swoop down, pluck her like a ripe apple, and fly off to some lonely place to enjoy the spoils. She was, after all, Queen of Nightmares, wickedest creature in the forest. She deserved her reward.

But then she remembered the prophecy seen in the skunk's entrails. If the sacrifice was to take place, it must be as they foretold. If she strayed too far from destiny's path, who knew what sort of disaster would result. Deciding she would remain true to her word, she kept on.

Along the road she flew, her keen eyes ready to spot any movement. The wind blew cold, freezing her bones.

Nightmare Bird came upon the girl, crying. She seemed to have gotten turned around and walked towards the road. Snot ran from her frozen nose, and her cloak proved to be ripped.

Giving her wings a single flap, Nightmare Bird shot ahead to lookout for danger. No sign of help, making it the perfect time to act.

Nightmare Bird let out a shriek loud enough to freeze the little girl's blood in her veins. A cry to remind her of all the evil creatures from storybooks and the demons feared in Sunday morning sermons. The little girl ran, clutching her ears, bawling like a babe. Every time she slowed, Nightmare Bird released her terrible shriek once more. She drove the little girl like cattle, past the crossroads, closer and closer to the cliff where the others waited, and to where sacrifice would take place.

The monsters hid themselves well. Only other monsters could have ever known how to see them. They stood in a half-moon, spread out along the road, waiting for their prey to arrive. Nightmare Bird descended from the sky.

Frightened, looking behind her like she believed that to be where the dangers lie, the girl entered the trap. The monsters moved around her, placing her between themselves, the river, and the high cliff wall.

“Dark Night,” whispered Nightmare Bird as she came closer. “Sacrifice.”

The monsters’ presence pushed the girl towards the rocks, towards the end of her life. The time for sacrifice finally fell upon them. Forward they moved, boxing the girl in, preventing escape. The monsters stood shoulder-to-shoulder now, so close they touched.

The girl continued to back away, a desperate look on her face. The monsters took another step. The girl looked behind her and down into the pit, then back in front of her, wide-eyed. Her feet tottered close to the edge. The monsters licked their lips at the sight. The snare sprung, and the victim assured.

They stepped forward once more.

Nightmare Bird’s keen eyes caught a flash of something strange. The girl held up the lantern, a light shone as bright as the sun in darkness, but a flame did not burn within. For just a moment, Nightmare Bird thought she saw wings, a fairy caught in glass and iron.

Before the thought fully registered, the girl jumped to the side, and the ground fell out from under the monsters. Harry Beast, being the heaviest, fell as though part of the earth. He landed between a half dozen wooden spikes poking cruelly from the ground. Thudrott and Puttygut fell side-by-side with Cornelius gripped tightly in their arms. They landed on the spikes, returning the vampire to the dust from which he came.

Falling, Nightmare Bird flapped in retreat, catching the wind and allowing it to lift her into the air. She beat her wings a second time, then a third, and flew to the top of the pit. She alone escaped.

Suddenly, strong cables wrapped her body, their grip like a clenched fist. Caught in a net, she crashed to the pit's edge and found herself helpless. Above her, the sacrifice stood, cloak thrown open only wide enough for her arm to escape. The girl held tightly to the net's cord, reeling in Nightmare Bird.

"And look what I have caught on this Dark Night," said the little girl in her little girl's voice. "Nightmare Bird, the wickedest thing in the forest, the greatest sacrifice of all."



FAIR TRADE

BEN PIENAAR

Gareth stood under an awning, watching the crowded street. Each narrow sidewalk and every shop seemed to have people moving all about, careless of the bad weather. It rang as odd to him that no one attempted to share the space under the awning, let alone even look his direction.

In lighter weather, Gareth might have steeled himself and reentered the fray. He had a lot of shopping left to do, after all, but right when he stuck his foot out, ready to walk, a fresh downpour followed a terrifying peal of thunder.

Without another thought, Gareth turned and pushed through the tiny door, for no other reason than to hide from the miserable day. *Maria could wait an hour more for groceries.*

"Hello, sir," a voice said from somewhere behind him. Gareth turned away from the storm and looked into the shop, surprised by the appearance.

The whole place was incredibly narrow, and when he thought of it, he was amazed that it managed to fit between Finnegan's Family Restaurant and Benny's Butchery in the first place. In fact, Gareth had never noticed the shop before. Once he got past the initial feeling of being cramped, he realized he couldn't quite tell what the store sold, or for that matter, who had spoken.

Two shelves ran the length, and as Gareth walked between them, he saw they were filled with nothing but certificates and trophies. They represented all kinds of achievements from swimming tournaments to chess championships, and strangely enough, marriage and birth certificates.

"Forgeries," Gareth whispered to himself.

"What was that, sir?"

By then he was far enough into the shop to see a small desk at the far end of the room and a little man sitting behind it. The man was one of those odd people full of

contradictions: young but with a face full of wrinkles. He appeared stick-like, but sat with a straight back and held a steady gaze.

Gareth, who was over six feet tall, already felt smaller than the man. As he approached the desk, he stuck his hands deep into his coat pockets. "Hello."

"Hello," the man replied. "I noticed you looking at my achievements."

Gareth raised his eyebrows. "Your?" He looked around and back to the man. "Oh, yes. I see. I really only came in for shelter, you know. Although, I didn't...I mean, I didn't think that it was legal to have a shop like this right out in the open. It's a very reputable street."

The man laughed and stood. They shook hands. His skin was dry and hot.

"My name is Daniel Samvels. And while those are indeed my achievements, they are also not forgeries," he winked. "However, they do not necessarily belong to me."

"I see. They are yours, but they don't belong to you." Gareth was beginning to wonder whether the man was all there. *Was the rain calming down outside?*

He turned to check but was drawn back to the man speaking.

"I think I can help you with your problems, Mr..."

"Cameron," Gareth said. "Gareth Cameron. Um, which problems exactly?"

The man shrugged, laughed, and waved his hand across the many objects in front of him. "Here, pick an achievement, any of them."

Gareth stared at the different items. After a moment, a half smile crept across his face. He grew worried, but the fellow didn't seem much of a threat. Suddenly, a watch stole Gareth's attention. He leaned in fast. *Everything else might be a forgery but that certainly isn't*, he thought.

"Alright, then," Gareth said. "What's your deal? What is it you sell?" He was very curious how Daniel made his living.

Daniel Samvels beamed as though he'd been paid a generous compliment.

"Well, Mr. Cameron, I'll do what anyone with a good product does: I'll show instead of tell. If you like what you see, you can choose to buy or walk away. Although," he added, leaning over the desk, "between you and me, you'll buy. I'd bet on it."

"I see," Gareth said. As far as he could tell, it was a forgery business, and in that case it was madness to associate with fake goods. Imagine a lawyer, of all people, being caught in such a place! But there was no one around, and he was curious. He nodded.

"Excellent!" Daniel said. He turned and opened a rickety door to his right and entered without so much as a glance to see if Gareth followed.

Gareth looked over his shoulder, but the people outside continued to walk right by the shop without a single cursory glance. He had a feeling the place didn't get much business despite the big shelves of achievements. He followed the man through the door.

The room held nothing in the way of furniture except a wooden desk in the middle with a chair on either side. The wall opposite was hidden behind a brown curtain, and the wall to the right held more shelves of certificates and trophies.

"Those are my more prized possessions," Daniel said, making his way around the desk.

Daniel opened the top drawer and took out a single die and a silver coin. He laid them down in front of Gareth, grinning.

"I...I'm not quite sure I see," said Gareth.

"Then I'll put it as simply as I can," Daniel said. "You give something to me, and I give something to you. We can start by flipping the coin. Or, if you're suspicious, you can use one from your pocket."

Gareth reached into his pocket and drew a coin. "This?"

"Yes, whatever. Now, that's a normal coin, so if you flip it ten times, roughly five will come out heads and five tails, correct?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

"Now I'm telling you, if you give me something, I can make it land tails every time, or heads, if you prefer. And it only needs to be a small something, since I'm only giving you a small something in return. Understand?"

"I think so," Gareth said hesitantly. "What exactly do you want from me to do this magic trick?"

"A fingernail."

"A fingernail?"

"Any one will do. Your pinky, even."

"I don't see how that will--"

"No, I'm sure you don't, Mr. Cameron, but that wasn't the agreement, was it?"

Well, Gareth thought. It is only a fingernail, after all.

"Okay, it's a deal," he said at last.

Daniel drew a pair of nail scissors from the same drawer. "Allow me." Gareth put his hand forward warily, and Daniel snipped the fingernail with practiced ease. He caught the tiny crescent in midair, and then dropped the clippers back into his desk. "Go on, then, Mr. Cameron. Ten times, all tails."

Gareth raised his eyebrows and flipped the coin once, twice, three times. All tails. He checked beneath the desk for some kind of magnet and found nothing but rotted wood.

Gareth flipped his coin again-four, five, six, seven more times. He flipped it differently each try, but it always came up tails. He checked to see if Daniel had somehow exchanged it for a two-sided coin and was disappointed. On the eleventh flip, it came up heads.

"Impossible." All thoughts of getting groceries and returning home to his wife were gone.

Daniel laughed.

"What about the dice?" Gareth inquired.

“Ah, well, that will require the rest of your fingernails, I think. Say, to land a six ten times in a row?”

Gareth could hardly believe his ears, but out came the scissors and away went his nails. Ten times the die landed on six. By the time the final die settled, Gareth felt like a man in a dream. It was, of course, a brilliant magic trick.

“It’s a trick then, isn’t it?”

Daniel sighed. “We can go on all day, Mr. Cameron. You can bring me dice or coins of your own, but then we do it with your toenails. You can have the room analyzed for devices if you would like. Or, the easiest way, we could bring up the stakes to the point where faking is impossible.”

“Like what?”

“You tell me. You name something you want, and I will make it happen...if you pay the price.”

“And what exactly is the price based on?”

“Gain—the more that is gained, the more that is lost.”

“Ah.” Gareth looked around the dusty room for ideas and found none. Then, at last, it came to him.

“My groceries!” he said. “Make them appear right here—everything on the list.” As he spoke, his hand delved into his pocket, found the list, and scrunched it up as though he were afraid Daniel might read it through his coat.

Daniel simply nodded and his eyes rolled up for a minute, as if calculating a few minor equations. “Mmm...Yes, a good choice. Impossible to fake but without too much gain. I think I will need the tip of any extremity—your choice. And only the very tip, you understand. Almost nothing at all.”

Gareth put his hand on the table. This would be the final experiment, and if it didn’t work...well...he thought the tip of a finger would be worth it for the show he’d been given, bizarre as it was.

Daniel whipped a scalpel from his coat pocket and took hold of Gareth’s pinky.

Gareth forced himself to watch, resisting the urge to pull away.

Daniel whipped the scalpel through the end of his finger with frightening speed. Gareth pulled his hand back and clutched it, waiting for the instant of pain to pass. A shiny oval of blood now sat where his fingerprint used to be.

"Well, I suppose that wasn't so bad."

Daniel gestured behind Gareth.

For a moment, Gareth didn't want to turn around. He was certain there was nothing there. He'd been tricked by a sadistic madman. And who's to say Daniel wouldn't attack him as soon as he turned his head? But he turned, and there the groceries were, in a neat pile of plastic bags just by the door.

Breathless, he pulled his shopping list from his pocket and touched every item while Daniel chuckled.

When Gareth was done, he shook so badly he fell back into the seat. He didn't dare take his eyes from the bags, as though they might disappear at any moment.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Cameron?" Daniel said, with only the slightest hint of impatience present in his voice.

Now Gareth understood the shelves in the front of the shop. They were achievements bought from this man. He must have copied them as a way to advertise. Or perhaps, he thought, so a customer could walk the shelves, choose an achievement, and buy it using a piece of himself.

Gareth's mind reeled with the possibilities. The potential of what he could accomplish became overwhelming.

That's it, he thought. I have it. My whole life, Everything I've ever wanted. It can all be mine.

In a strange ecstasy, Gareth took off his left shoe and sock, leaned back in the chair, and slammed his foot on the table.

"What can I get for these?" he asked, wiggling his toes.

Daniel threw his head back and clapped his hands, laughing with seemingly genuine amusement.

"Now we are talking my language, sir!" He stood up and walked over to the brown curtain.

In one easy motion, Daniel swept the curtain aside. Gareth saw a surgeon's armory hanging, from pliers to cleavers, razors to bone saws—everything one would need to dismantle a human body into a thousand pieces.

For a second, Gareth felt terrified, but then he remembered that this was a business deal. The man had honored everything thus far, and while what he wanted as payment was bizarre, no one could say he hadn't delivered.

Daniel took something from the wall that looked like a brand new pair of hedge clippers.

He set the clippers on the table and folded his hands in front of him, smiling widely.

"Yes," Daniel said. "There is plenty you could get with the toes on this foot, and plenty more with the whole foot. But it is better, I think, if you name your want, and then I name my price."

Gareth noticed how clean and new the tools seemed, gleaming in the room's dim light.

"Ah, alright then," Gareth said, his mind spinning with ideas. *It should be something decent*, he thought, *something worth toes*.

"You must keep in mind, Mr. Cameron, that I have been quite lenient with my prices so far. Not too much, but do not think you can make your life perfect with a hand or a foot."

"Yes, of course." Gareth nodded. It was sensible after all. Didn't all salesmen do that? A test drive before you paid for the real thing.

"I would like...to win the lottery," he said slowly, knowing he was pushing his luck. "The biggest one in the world—the biggest jackpot, I mean. Whatever it is."

Daniel grinned and nodded thoughtfully. "This I can do. If I take all of your toes."

Gareth stared. His heart beat so hard he could feel a vein throbbing near his big toe.

"All of them?" he asked.

“Yes. But the largest lottery in the world, that is in America, full of taxes. You would do better to take the English lottery. It will be easier to claim your prize, and the money you get is still one hundred and sixty million pounds. Tax free.”

“That’s sixteen million pounds per toe.”

Daniel watched him patiently.

The silence dragged on. Gareth turned and looked from the piles of shopping bags back to the man. “I’ll do it,” he said, almost whispering.

No sooner had he said the words did three of the toes disappear, and the pain struck him like an iron club. He fell from his chair, but Daniel kept one impossibly strong hand on his ankle as he worked his way down his foot.

The blades cut through his last two toes an instant before the clippers snipped shut. A terrible popping noise accompanied the departure of each, followed by the soft clicks of them landing on the wooden floor.

Gareth squeezed his eyes shut and let out a scream that must have rattled the front windows. In his agony, he forgot that he’d promised Daniel another five toes.

Daniel didn’t bother to take off Gareth’s right shoe, but instead, he walked around the table and cut right through it, severing all five toes in a straight line, and taking a good part of his foot, as well. All of it fell onto the floor—a chunk of flesh and blood, mingled with leather and fabric.

For a long time, Daniel did nothing but roll on the floor and scream. He blacked out once, and when he came to, he threw up. As the pain became more manageable, he opened his eyes and focused on Daniel standing over him, chuckling. His face shined from a thin sheen of sweat.

“Ah. Now that was something, Mr. Cameron. You won’t regret it, I promise you.” With that pledge, he took out a long rectangular piece of paper and pressed it into Gareth’s shaking hand: a lottery ticket. “You now hold the winning numbers for next week’s jackpot, sir. Congratulations.”

"I...Good God, let me out of here! Let me out!" Gareth clutched his ticket and crawled towards the doorway.

"Don't forget your groceries!" Daniel called after him.

Gareth wiped his mouth and attempted to stand. The absence of toes made it difficult to keep his balance. He noticed the trail of blood behind him, but the flow seemed to slow down surprisingly fast.

He managed to drag his groceries all the way out the front door, but received no help from the sly and sharply dressed salesman. When Gareth glanced over his shoulder, Daniel was nowhere to be found.

Gareth won the lottery the following Monday night, which was a good thing because the first thing he'd done after he returned with the groceries was leave his wife. He had wanted to do it for years, and oh, was it sweet, seeing her sour face turn to gaping surprise. That moment was enough to pay him back for every evil word and threat she'd ever heaped upon him.

For nearly two weeks, Gareth laughed about his good fortune. Using crutches to help him hobble on his toeless feet, the pain hardly bothered him at all. And people stared at him, yes, but he knew it wasn't the disability. It was the money. Already he'd received phone calls from people he'd never met, claiming to be long lost relatives.

He quit his job, telling all his co-workers what he thought of them. He purchased a mansion on the edge of town. His new wardrobe consisted of nothing but ten-thousand-dollar suits. His new car cost more than what most people pay for their homes. He purchased everything he ever wanted and lived the life he had always dreamed.

But Gareth still was not happy. All he could think about was the weedy little man in the shop, and what he still had to offer.

Eventually desire got the better of him, so he decided to go back to see Daniel Samvels.

“Ah, Mr. Cameron,” Daniel said, welcoming him with open arms. “I was afraid you’d never return! You left so unhappily last time, you see, and I was also a little afraid I’d maybe given you too much.”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot, actually,” Gareth said, shaking Daniel’s hand.

“Is that so?” Daniel asked. “Well, why don’t you sit and we can talk about it?”

It wasn’t long before they struck a new deal.

Gareth gave a kidney for an IQ of two hundred, his entire right arm for an extra life, and his left eye and ear for the ability to understand, speak, and write every language.

Next, he gave his teeth for the ability to charm any woman he wanted. That one was particularly painful. The worst part of the entire process was the enjoyment Daniel seemed to have while working with pliers. He shrieked with laughter all the while, dancing around a half conscious Gareth.

He spent most of his left leg on eternal wealth and gave his right for the ability to fly.

Who needed legs when you could fly, anyway?

That one, Daniel told him, would take three days to take effect, just like the language skills and irresistible charm. They were all powerful abilities, he explained, so it would take some time.

At last, Gareth had enough.

Daniel propped him up in the far corner of the room, his right side-what was left of it-pressed up against the window. Blood pooled everywhere, but still, he felt fine. That, Daniel assured him, was part of the deal. You felt the pain, but the damage quickly healed.

“Dead customers are not likely to come back, after all.” Daniel smiled.

Gareth suffered plenty of pain, and with each throb of agony he knew he made the right choice. Nothing in the world could stop him. His life was made. In the matter of

weeks, he would become the most powerful man alive—the richest, and the most charismatic.

He watched Daniel wipe the bloody tools clean and place them back behind the brown curtain, humming as he went. When he finished, he walked over to Gareth and shook his left hand heartily.

“Well, Mr. Cameron,” he said, “It’s been excellent doing business with you. Three days from now, the more extreme of your requests will be granted, but the others you possess as of this very second.”

Gareth grinned back at Daniel, fresh blood streaming down his chin. “Dank you, Misser Sam’els. Can’d waid.”

What Daniel didn’t know was that Gareth was going to have most of what he’d lost replaced with expensive modern devices. And then, what had he really lost? Even arms and legs could be replaced with machines.

“Yes, yes! It will be brilliant!” Daniel agreed. “Just be patient. Here, you can rest in my shop until the effects come into play. Just sleep a while, and when you wake, the world will be yours.”

Gareth smiled gratefully, muttered another thank you, and then fell fast asleep.

He dreamed he traveled the earth, rich and famous. He experienced every delicacy, every adventure that the world had to offer. He dreamed of becoming a president, of stopping wars, and of becoming a legend.

When he woke, he saw a long rectangle of grey sky above him. He sat up, with much difficulty, using his stump to push himself against the wall. On either side were two moldy walls—an alleyway. Gareth frowned. It was all very well if Mr. Samvels hadn’t wanted him lying in his shop, but had he really had to dump him like trash?

He crawled like a lopsided tortoise to the end of the alleyway, disgusted by his surroundings. *Mold and garbage*, he thought as he pushed along. All he needed was to flag

down a taxi and get back to his mansion. Luckily all of the bleeding had stopped, and his wounds proved to be healed.

But when he reached the pavement, he realized that no taxi would pick him up in his current state. Everyone who saw him crossed the road or completely turned around and walked the other way.

Gareth tried asking a man for help, but his lack of teeth rendered the words incomprehensible. The man stared ahead and walked past, but not before dropping a few coins at his feet.

Fool! I'm infinitely rich, not a damned beggar!

When he turned back to the alleyway, his heart nearly stopped. Benny's Butchery sat on one side and Finnegan's Family Restaurant on the other. He was right where Mr. Samvels had left him—only the shop had vanished.

Gareth wondered how long he'd been asleep. Obviously less than three days, since he couldn't fly yet. He still had infinite wealth, a second life, and an IQ of two hundred. He just needed to get back to his mansion. But no one would help him. For three days, he kept to the alleyway, begging and snatching the discard from Benny's and Finnegan's dumpsters, and waiting for his powers to arrive.

His mind traveled to the things he would do when he received what he had paid for. The first step would be having a shower and then a good meal. Then he'd charm a woman or two. The thought made him laugh.

The third day came to an end, so did the fourth, and then the fifth.

The truth settled in and he began to beg in earnest.

Gareth remained in the alley, waiting for Daniel Samvels to come back and give him what he was owed. If you paid him enough coin, and had a good ear for his toothless speech, you might hear a decent story in return. It's not a likely story, maybe, but it's a good one, and it even has a moral.

“Qui’ whi’e you’re ahead,” Gareth would say. “A phew phingers, or ‘oes, and den ‘eave phorever. Iph you can do dat, da world can be yours.”



SPARROW RIDGE

SEAN GRIGSBY

An armadillo's carcass baked in the sun. Pebbles of loose gravel bounced and rattled as the silver Ford coupe rumbled over it.

"There's another one!"

"Yeah, well, what do you expect, Joey? It's Arkansas."

"But that's like the fifth one we've seen," Joey said.

"In Texas, I bet they use them to make lines down the highways. You know, to keep drivers awake."

"Well, I know I couldn't doze off thinking about those dead, beady eyes starin' at me the whole time," Joey said.

Roger laughed and the Ford swerved. Joey started to say something but the car realigned to the center of the road. Roger had been driving like that since they'd begun up the mountain.

"You know, in some cultures the armadillo is a bad omen."

"What do you mean?" Roger asked.

"They say if you see a dead armadillo on a journey, you'll never come back."

They looked at each other, Roger turning back to the road every few seconds.

"Aw, you're just screwin' with me!"

"No, I'm serious. Armadillos are warnings of a horrible death."

"Even if I believed that crap, the place we're headed is full of poor bastards that are a lot closer to death's door than

us.”

“What kind of name is Fifty-Six anyway?”

“I dunno. Maybe that’s the town’s population,” Roger said.

“I haven’t seen anything outside of rundown churches for the last twenty-five miles.”

An eighteen-wheeler raced towards them, straight down the middle of the mountain road. Joey clutched the ceiling handle and Roger’s shoulder. Roger jerked the car to the right into a patch of bushes just in time. The truck’s blaring horn faded fast. Roger slammed his hand on the wheel.

“Yeah I can hit the horn, too, asshole!”

I knew something like this would happen, Joey thought.

“Are you okay?” Roger asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then, do you mind pulling your fingers out of my shoulder?”

Joey let go but kept his right hand squeezed on the ceiling handle as they continued over the hill. Thick, ominous clouds moved in slowly, darkening the gorge below. Endless rows of green hills spanned the distance and a red farmhouse sat deep and far away in the valley.

Joey watched Roger throw a bottle to the floor below his feet, adding it to the pile of other trash. In his paranoia, he imagined one of the empty bottles rolling behind the brake pedal, preventing its use, sending them flying off of the mountain. He shuddered at the thought.

The road curved and became steep again. Joey braced himself for another surprise, but the car turned onto a hidden trail just at the top of the rise.

They moved up a gravel drive with patches of greenery sprouting all over. Dust signaled their arrival as they passed a sign hanging from two crooked chains.

SPARROW RIDGE.

The letters were painted in black. Splinters protruded from around a blocky figure that Joey could only assume was an etching of the home’s namesake.

The structure was just as old and smoky. The windows glowed a dark orange in the dwindling afternoon light. As they pulled up to the old house, Joey noticed a moldy substance coating various parts of loose paneling. He could even smell the age and decay from the car's open window. After the dust settled, a short, husky woman stepped out onto the porch.

Her hair was curled and messy. She gave a single swiping wave and dropped her arm back to her side before descending the porch steps. She walked towards the two men climbing out of the car.

"You boys are almost late," she said. "Charlene Elkins."

"Roger Grubbs," he said, shaking her outstretched hand.

"Joey Murch."

"Well, get your things and come on in."

She turned to the house, shuffled back onto the porch and through the screen door. Joey and Roger walked around to the trunk.

"This broad's crazy. Almost late?" Joey said, removing a suitcase. "Isn't that the same thing as being on time?"

Roger laughed and they stepped onto the porch. Joey noticed an old gas can to the left sitting in the space where he suspected a swing would have been. He looked to the ceiling and saw two rusty hooks but nothing more.

Inside, the house smelled like dead flowers. The lighting was hazy and the combination of pastel coral-colored walls made Joey feel lightheaded. Ms. Elkins waited at the bottom of a staircase. "Your rooms are upstairs and down the hall, the last two on the right. Once you get settled, come back down and I'll introduce you to everybody."

Roger led the way and stopped at the second to last door. "I guess this is me," he said.

Small slips, the size of fortune cookie paper, were stuck to each door with the men's respective names typed in a swirly, black font.

Joey's door opened with a creak. A tall bed, covered in quilts, rested against the far left corner. No windows. He placed his suitcase on a steamer trunk at the foot of the bed and met Roger in the hall.

"This place looks like Norman Bates is gonna pop out of a closet," Joey said.

"Oh, come on. It's just old and country. You'll have two weeks to get used to it. Besides, we took my car and you can't leave without me."

"A decision that's revealed itself more unwise by the minute."

"Smart ass," Roger said, stomping back downstairs.

They met Ms. Elkins in front of two wooden sliding doors.

"Before we go into the living room, I wanted to brief you on a few things," she said.

They nodded.

"I only hire the best CNAs and both of you come highly recommended."

"Thank—"

"However," she said, "I have higher standards than anywhere you have or will work."

Joey tried to hold back a swallow but couldn't stop. Ms. Elkins continued.

"That's why I require two weeks on and two weeks off. But it's also why I pay more." She folded her chubby arms against her chest. "We're like a family so while you're staying here, I expect you to keep your rooms clean, help with the dishes after every meal, and be the first to come to the aid of any one of our residents at any time of the day or night. Is all of this clear?"

"Yes ma'am," Roger said.

Joey nodded.

"Alright, then."

She turned and parted the sliding doors as if it were a carnival attraction. Several elderly were spread throughout the room—in wheelchairs, sharing small love seats, benches

and stools, and some sat-watching Wheel of Fortune. A thin, middle-aged woman in scrubs stood against the wall to the right of the television. Ms. Elkins pointed to her.

“Nurse Hale, could you turn it off for a minute?”

The woman did, rousing agitated groans from the spectators.

“Now don’t get huffy. We’ll turn it back on in a second,” Ms. Elkins said. “I want to introduce each of you to Roger Grubbs and Joey—uh, Mirth, is it?”

“Murch,” Joey corrected.

“Murch. They’re here to take good care of you for the next two weeks and hopefully,” she looked back at both of them, “further in the future.”

She led the men around the room to meet each resident.

Behind the seated group, a droopy man paced back and forth with a walker. Every few seconds he farted and then apologized. His name was Landon Ellery and he kept the same routine from morning until night—pacing, farting, and apologizing.

Daniel Ronn, dressed in a fine, pressed suit and shiny wingtips, eyed the new help from his wheelchair, an expression of disdain held on his face.

“You pricks look like you couldn’t tie your own shoes,” he said.

Ms. Elkins explained that he was the eldest and more ornery inhabitant next to Olyphant Jackson. The shriveled black woman sat on a small stool against the wall, staring into the air. Her eyes were a pale blue and her brow was scrunched up as if lost in thought. Joey stepped towards her and kneeled down. He was about to introduce himself, but she jabbed her cane into his gut, making him stagger back.

“Best not get too close, you hear?” Ms. Jackson said.

Roger lost all ability to contain his amusement. Ms. Elkins shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve warned you. Ms. Jackson likes to poke.” Ms. Elkins said and lowered her voice to a whisper.

“She’s also blind.”

“It’s okay,” Joey said, holding his stomach.

Solomon Douglas sat against a floral patterned loveseat. He wheezed with folded arms, sitting in a very stiff position. He sat next to a man and woman holding hands—the twins, Arthur and Eunice Griffin. Arthur wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses and a bow tie. Eunice kept her hair in a bun and wore pearls around her neck.

A soft yelp came from the other side of the room.

“Mr. Cox!” Ms. Elkins called out.

Nurse Hale stood embarrassed next to a wrinkled man sitting in a rocking chair, clutching his right hand.

“This is Fletcher Cox,” Ms. Elkins said with a stiff hand pointed in his direction. “Be sure to watch him when Nurse Hale isn’t around. He can’t control himself, and don’t be afraid to secure him in his room. His children have already signed off for that.”

“Stuck-up cow,” he said as she passed.

She popped a glare at him and he jerked back into the rocker, sliding his hands around the straps of his overalls.

Basel Billings laughed and slapped his knees. He had long white hair down to his shoulders and a trimmed goatee.

“Basel likes to help his fellow guests by ingesting their medicine. Don’t you, Basel?” He laughed and held his arms up as if he were being mugged.

“What are you laughing at, Mrs. Billings?” Daniel Ronn asked.

The others joined in, chanting “Mrs. Billings, Mrs. Billings.”

Basel plunked his head down and brought clasped hands to his face.

“Now, stop it everybody!” Ms. Elkins yelled before turning back to Joey and Roger. “They all call him that because of his long hair.”

She patted Basel’s shoulder and continued on.

Sergeant Carson sat in a recliner with medals pinned to the pocket of his flannel shirt. He had fought in both the

Korean and Second World War.

“Don’t make any sudden popping noises around him. He’ll fling himself to the ground and cuss and shout. The last incident took us over an hour to put him back in his chair. Greta Bayless’ granddaughter had come flaunting a helium balloon she’d received at a restaurant in Mountain View. When it burst, the noises of a screaming girl and a vulgar veteran’s yelling flooded the house.”

Greta Bayless smiled as far as her dimples would allow. She sat in her wheelchair and clapped her hands together when the men approached. As Ms. Elkins introduced them, Greta opened her mouth to speak but her dentures plopped onto her lap. Greta looked down at her false teeth and then back at the boys, grinning. Ms. Elkins helped her put them back in.

“They’re gonna put a hole in my head!” Greta said.

“Oh,” Joey said. “That’s...nice.”

He looked back at Roger.

“Now don’t go telling stories, Mrs. Bayless,” Ms. Elkins said. “I guess we better get dinner over with. Nurse Hale? Boys? Could you help everybody into the dining room?”

She wheeled Greta Bayless into the next room, and the others followed.

The table wobbled under the weight of ham, sweet potatoes, greens, and a steaming dish of cherry cobbler.

Joey tried not to pay attention to the disgusting way some of the residents ate, or how Mrs. Jackson seemed to stare at him with her sky-colored eyes. He would have waved his hand in front of her face but didn’t want to chance another poke in the stomach. After he and Roger finished up the dishes and helped everyone to their room, they went their separate ways and called it a night.

The first thing Joey noticed when he closed his door was the lack of a lock. He thought it was one of those cheap

push-and-turn knobs.

No such luck.

He looked for something to prop against the door—something at least to slow down a wandering geriatric who might catch him undressing. Deciding that he was being irrational, and that the trunk would make too much noise, he gave a sigh and stripped down to his boxer briefs. Taking off his digital watch, he set an alarm for the morning and placed it on a post at the foot of the bed.

Joey walked over and flicked the light off. The room was so dark he couldn't even see images in his head. He moved forward with caution but bumped his shin against the wooden chest and swore under his breath.

Everything sounds louder in the dark.

He listened for a moment but only heard the distant wheezing of Solomon Douglas across from Roger's room.

He slipped into the bed. The sheets were cool against his bare skin, and the feeling was enjoyable. Even though he was comfortable, he was also frightened. As a kid he had imagined horrible things living in the shadows. Even as an adult he was unable to suppress the thoughts.

Joey stared between the door and the ceiling, or at least where he thought they were before the world went black.

A quick, sharp creak jolted Joey awake.

The door.

But when he looked up, no light peeking in from the hall. The door was still closed. His first instinct was to go back to sleep but his mind wouldn't let him. He laid there, letting the silence of the strange place wash over him.

A steady scratching sound caused his body to tense. In the blackness, he couldn't tell where the noise was coming from but knew it was with him in the room. He held tight to the covers and drew his knees against his chest. Not that he

thought it would be much protection, but it was all he could do, aside from risking the trek to the light switch.

The scraping became louder and longer in stride, like someone raking a knife into a thick log. Every bone and ligament urged him to move, to jump, to run. His mind exploded with images of awful things. He tried to fight the thoughts but that just made them more vivid.

The sawing sound stopped.

Joey moved his head around, listening carefully, but nothing happened. His body relaxed. A dull pain ached in his legs from the cramped position.

Maybe it was just in my head, he thought. *The dark always plays tricks on me.*

It was a strange place and his subconscious was just expressing its discomfort—nothing more. The thought calmed him until he fell back asleep.

The next morning the door flew open while he was dressing in his scrubs. Joey spun around with his arms up, posed to attack.

“Don’t shoot,” Roger chuckled.

“You scared the crap out of me!”

“My bad.”

“Did you hear any weird scratching noises last night?” Joey asked.

“Nah slept like a rock,” Roger replied. “You’d better hurry up. Ms. Elkins wants us downstairs in five minutes.”

“Fine. I just need to find my shoes and I’ll be right behind you.”

Joey checked behind the wooden chest, even inside, but found nothing but cobwebs and a hot, sour stench. He closed the drawer and got on his knees to inspect under the bed. His heart raced as he looked at the shoes sitting neatly together against the far wall. He was sure he hadn’t put them in such an inconvenient place. As he reached for

them, his mind fell back to the sounds from the previous night. Someone had to have been in there and moved his shoes as a joke. He lowered himself closer to the ground and pushed farther under the bed. His head knocked against a wooden support board. Closing his eyes, he waited for the pain to recede. He rolled on his back to see what had got him and something etched in the wood caught his attention.

The cuts were too strategic to be random. It looked like a message, but if it said anything, he couldn't make it out. There was an 'L', maybe a 'T'. He brushed away the particles of scratched wood and blinked as the shavings fell into his eyes.

I'LL EAT YOUR HEART

Once the words registered, he scrambled from under the bed, into the hall, and flew down the stairs. Swinging around the corner, he bumped into Ms. Elkins.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?"

"I...there..."

"And where on earth are your shoes?"

Joey looked down at his white socks.

"This house is old," she said, "plenty of nails and splinters to stick ya." She looked at him with a confused look. "What's the matter?"

He could see on Ms. Elkins' face that she wouldn't believe him or, more likely, wouldn't care.

"I'm fine...just excited to start."

"Well, go get your shoes and march back down here."

She turned around and walked through a swinging door leading to the kitchen. Joey placed his hand on the banister, looked up the dark rows of stairs, and sighed.

Roger and Joey had years of experience working in nursing homes. And although Sparrow Ridge was secluded and had many strange characteristics and residents, the job was about the same. Ms. Elkins' standards were easy enough to

make habit. All you had to do was shut up, keep your head down, and do what was asked. Joey wondered when the hard stuff would start.

An hour before lunch, Nurse Hale handed him a key and chart, instructing him to retrieve everyone's medication from the locked cabinet in the kitchen. Entering in through the swinging door, he saw the cabinet stretched open and Basel Billings struggling with a bottle of red pills.

When the old man saw Joey rushing towards him, he ripped the top off and tried swallowing the evidence. Joey grabbed his arm with one hand and attempted to contain the pills with the other. Basel shook his fists like a baby fighting for a pacifier, and Joey gave a hard pull in the opposite direction. The pills cascaded into the sink, the last one swirling around the hole before dropping in with the rest.

"What the hell, Basel?"

Basel dropped to the ground with his hands over his head, rocking back and forth.

"Alright, look. Both of us are gonna be in trouble if anyone finds out about this. This is going to be our secret. Okay?"

Basel nodded.

After returning him to the living room, Joey set out a tray and dispensed what remained of the residents' medication. The chart showed each resident having prescribed cocktails as different as their personalities. But they all required the red pill.

Shit.

Luckily, no one seemed to notice they were missing.

In between attaching IV's and wiping backsides, Joey's mind returned to the etching in the wood as he studied each resident.

It had to be one of them. Ms. Elkins was too large to be that stealthy, and too professional to pull a prank like that.

He also knew Roger would have been overflowing with comical guilt, and since he wasn't acting funny Joey decided to tell him.

He waited until Roger left the main room then followed him down the hallway and into the bathroom.

"Uh, did you come in to give me a hand?"

"I've got to tell you something."

"Mr. Cox must have grabbed your ass."

"No, listen. That scratching sound I asked you about...I found out what it was."

"Yeah?" Roger reached for a roll of brown paper towels.

"Someone etched a message in a board under my bed: I'll eat your heart."

Roger looked at him, crunching a paper towel between his fists. "Really? Really, Joey? We have to get back to work," he said, shouldering past Joey.

"I'm serious," Joey said, but the door had already swung closed. He sighed. Not only did he have the rest of the work day ahead of him but was certain he was in for an even longer night.

After dinner, Roger and Joey escorted each resident to their rooms. The twins complained, kicking and scratching when Joey attempted to lead Mr. Griffin upstairs. Roger brought Eunice up behind them, assuring Arthur that she was right there with him every inch of the way.

Mr. Ronn made rude comments, even after being put in bed. Joey was hesitant to work with Mrs. Jackson. Roger snorted and stepped towards her, asking if he could hold the cane.

"I suppose," Mrs. Jackson said.

Roger walked her towards the staircase, leaving Joey and Greta Bayless alone in the living room. Greta smiled and made her joyful, silent applause.

"Let's go," he said and wheeled her to the stairs.

Joey took a breath and steadied himself, stepping backwards and pulling her and the chair up each step. She giggled the whole way. Sweat slid down his face and back, and he needed to take two breaks before reaching the top. Once there, Joey rested his aching arms against the handles of the wheelchair.

Resting only increased her laughing. Joey shook his head, then wheeled her the rest of the way to her room.

The walls were pink and bare except for a calendar with pictures of kittens. Beside the bed stood a white, plastic stool holding up a vase of dying flowers and the remains of a balloon.

"Let me hear your *heart beat*," Greta said, as Joey tucked her in.

"What did you say?"

"*Let me hear your heart beat.*" The pitch of her voice took a dive.

"No," Joey said, instantly thinking about the etching. "It's bedtime—"

"Let me hear your heart beat... Let me hear your heart beat..."

She chanted the words, sang them, louder and louder. The smile never left her face. It became crooked, revealing her blocky false teeth.

Joey stepped backwards towards the door.

Ms. Elkins rushed in, a syringe in hand. She pushed down hard on the old woman's left arm, removed the cap of the needle with her mouth, and went to inject it, but Greta's arm flailed.

"Help me hold her down!"

Joey pressed his weight on Greta Bayless' side as Ms. Elkins injected red liquid into a bulging vein. Greta's body relaxed, and the droning of her loud chant quieted. Ms. Elkins removed the syringe and covered the old woman with the blanket.

"Did she take all her pills today?"

He nodded and followed Ms. Elkins into the hall.

"What was wrong with her?" Joey asked.

"They sometimes get that way...when they get close to passing."

"How long do you think she has?"

"Hard to say. This might be her last night at Sparrow Ridge," she said matter-of-factly.

Ms. Elkins walked towards the staircase and lifted a hand in goodnight. Joey returned the wave, even though he knew she couldn't see it, and entered his bedroom. He shut the door behind him, moved the chest against the closet, and then went to the far wall. The bed was heavy but he managed to scoot it away from the corner. He got behind the bed post and shoved it against the door.

Joey left the light on. He also kept his clothes on and placed his shoes on top of the nightstand before slipping under the sheets. He was more comfortable in the light.

Just have to get through a few days, Joey thought before he drifted off to sleep.

The door rumbled against the foot of the bed.

The room was dark, somehow. Joey jumped up and crept towards the light switch. Again, the door shook. Someone was trying to get in, someone stronger than Greta Bayless or anyone else in the house. Stretching his arm, he flicked the switch. Nothing happened. His heart sped up as his mind raced with outlandish possibilities.

Joey searched for the nightstand and clumsily slipped his shoes on, lifting his head every few seconds, looking at the door, wondering why no one else seemed to hear it, and if they did, where were they? He moved behind the bed and placed both hands on top of the headboard, ready to push to keep the door shut.

Everything went quiet.

Outside, Joey heard slow measured steps. In between each creak of the wood, the thing on the other side hissed. He heard it move away from his door and across the hall. At first he was relieved that it went away, until he realized it might be heading for Roger's room.

"Oh, shit!" Joey muffled behind his palms.

Joey heard Roger's door creaking open. He wanted to move, to help his friend, but he was in shock. The amount of fear pervading his body outweighed his conscience. He froze. Low vibrations bounced against the wall in the tune of Roger's voice. Furniture shuffled, something shattered, and then Roger screamed.

Joey scrambled for his suitcase in the dark and began searching for the flashlight he had packed. After retrieving it, he pulled the bed clear of the door.

Once in the hallway, Joey took a breath and tried to listen for any movement, holding the flashlight in his hands like a weapon.

Everything was silent once more.

He stepped towards Roger's room, slowly. The door stood wide open. After a silent prayer, Joey clicked on the flashlight and took a step into the room, convinced that his mind was playing tricks on him, that it was all a dream.

Something was under the sheet on top of Roger's bed. It didn't move. Sensing someone behind him, Joey spun around, quickly shining light into every corner and shadow.

No one there.

He squatted to the floor and peered under the bed.

Empty.

There was still the sheet to check. The form was indistinct. He stretched his thumb and index finger to a corner of the fabric and pulled hard and fast.

Roger's throat lay ripped out, the wound mashed and drying. His body looked starved and his dead eyes held an expression of terror. Joey choked on vomit and tried to yell at the same time. He fell, shaking.

The light pierced upward against the ceiling, illuminating the impossible. Greta Bayless hung from it by her hands and feet.

Joey screamed.

The old woman's eyes were crazed and deep, and her skin was a dark gray. She heaved in a strange rhythm while gobs of blood oozed from her gaping maw. Joey backed away on his hands, kicking at the ground for purchase.

She hissed. Her slimy dentures fell out of her mouth. Left in their place were jagged rows of sharp, bloody fangs.

Joey screamed again, this time, finding his feet. He rushed for the hallway. The creature dropped down and slashed his back with what felt like a hand full of railroad spikes. Reeling in pain, he swung around and bashed the flashlight against her temple. She crumpled to the ground. The flashlight spun and wobbled on the hard wood floor, revealing only quick flashes of what lie in front of him.

Long, sharp claws, protruded from her fingers, covered in crimson gore. He realized it was his blood trickling along their length. Making sure she stayed down, he gave a swift kick to her gut, turned, and lurched for the doorway.

He had to find Ms. Elkins.

A hand gripped around his ankle and he shrieked. He turned to see Greta Bayless bearing her teeth in demonic laughter. He went to kick her in the face but pulled his leg back when her mouth widened to the size of a bowling ball. Joey shook free of her grip and Greta jumped to her feet.

Joey ran from the room, slamming the door just before she crashed into it, shaking the frame.

Claws scraped at the wood. It wouldn't be long before she burst through. He kept a firm grip on the trembling door knob and leaned forward, searching for an escape. His eyes adjusted to the dark enough to see Solomon Douglas' room. In one fluid motion, Joey let go of the knob and advanced into the next room, closing the door behind him.

Joey heard Greta burst into the hallway. He pressed himself against the cold wood, gritting his teeth and trying to hold his breath. Her raging screams dimmed into a ravenous hiss as her steps inched closer to Solomon's door.

Joey braced his entire body but relaxed when he heard Greta pass by and run down the stairs. His relieved breath woke Solomon Douglas.

"Who...who's...there?" he wheezed. "You...shouldn't be in...here."

Joey ignored him.

"Get...out!"

Mr. Douglas made a horrible, wet noise, like he was coughing up a lung.

"Shut up!"

Mr. Douglas began chanting and mumbling. The outline of the man shifted. The gasping noises slowed. For a brief moment, Joey calmed down, and he felt a pang of guilt for yelling at the old man.

"Just stay calm, Mr. Douglas."

Mr. Douglas began to writhe under the blanket, his back bending and his chest heaving.

"Please keep quiet, okay?" Joey asked, trying to decide if he should go to his aid and risk leaving the door unguarded.

After a few minutes of Mr. Douglas' body jerking up and down like he was in the throes of a seizure, his body went stiff.

Joey relaxed from the door but kept his foot wedged at the bottom. His eyes stung as his mind fought to make sense of the past few minutes. Images of Roger's corpse, the words under the bed, and the beast that was Greta, flashed through his head.

The moment of reflection broke when Solomon's body jerked. The body jerked again, faster. Suddenly, Mr. Douglas flew from his bed screaming like a banshee.

Joey abandoned the door and tried to subdue Solomon. He pushed him back and grabbed the blanket from the bed. He

attempted to wrap it around the man's head but in vain. Joey's strength was easily overthrown. The creature tossed Joey forward and broke off a piece of wood from the bed frame.

Mr. Douglas jumped towards him but Joey skirted and ran for the door. Before he reached the knob, he yelped as the wood hit him bluntly in the back. He stumbled into the hallway, slamming the door behind him. Aching cries and hisses echoed from every room as he made his way through the house.

He carefully moved towards the stairs. Greta was nowhere to be seen. Joey tried to keep quiet but his shoes squeaked with each step from the wet blood thick on the hallway floor. Midway down the stairs, Joey turned back to see Mr. Douglas clawing along the side of the wall. Other deranged residents spilled from their rooms. Joey jumped the remaining stairs and landed hard against the floor. Ignoring the pain, he hurried towards the front door.

Something grabbed his scrubs and yanked him into the side closet. Joey's scream was muffled against a hand cupped around his lips.

"Shhhh!"

Nurse Hale loosened her grip. She kept her gaze through the small slits in the door blinds as she whispered, "Thank goodness you're alright. Where's Roger?"

Joey shook his head.

"Oh, what a mess. What a mess we're in," she said. "These patients aren't normal and when they're close to dyin' the thirst takes over."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You've seen it yourself! They need blood to keep going and the darkness inside them helps them get it."

"These things crawl on the walls and the ceiling! They have claws and teeth the size of ice picks. I have a hard time believing this is a last ditch effort to fulfill a bucket list."

"You're not listening to me. These things were born this way. There haven't been many. But the ones that pop up..." She locked her arms together. "When whatever shred of humanity they have dies, all that is left is darkness and all they want is to eat."

Joey thought if Roger were alive, he would make some crack about grampires. He wished he could laugh. He shook his head at the sound of one of the beasts nearing the closet.

"How do you know all this?"

She let out a long hot breath that smelled sweet.

"When other nursing homes see the changes they send them to us. We're out of the way, up in the mountains. Small doses of blood inside gel capsules ease the passing. But that isn't important now. We need to get out of here."

"Shit! Those little red pills. Of course it would be those pills." He took a breath and wiped his forehead. "I didn't give them out." Joey spoke more to himself, still looking out the slats.

"You what?"

"It was Basel! He was trying to down the whole bottle. I tried stopping him but the pills...the pills are gone."

"That was the only thing keeping them settled."

"Where's Ms. Elkins?" Joey asked after a moment. Screams littered the air, echoing through the hollow, old house.

"I think she's trapped in her room with Mrs. Bayless."

Joey tensed up at the name.

The screams echoed for another moment, and another creature walked nearby. Joey heard claws dig into the walls and ceiling. Again the house fell silent. Nurse Hale shifted in front of Joey and turned the handle, cracking the door. Joey gripped her arm. She patted his hand, seemingly trying to reassure him.

"That's a girl!" The voice wasn't human.

Nurse Hale was jerked through the door and into the embrace of Fletcher Cox.

"Say, boy, ain't she a peach," Fletcher said, smacking Nurse Hale's backside, his fingers digging into the meat.

"Let her go!" Joey yelled and burst out of the closet after her.

"Just a minute, boy."

The thing bit into her neck, whipping its head back and forth. Nurse Hale screamed until her throat was torn out.

Joey ran along the wall and grabbed a poker from an old fireplace set. He charged forward, swinging, and luckily lodged the poker into Cox's skull.

The creature laughed from blood-drenched jaws. He dropped Nurse Hale's dried up shell and yanked the metal rod from his head. Rushing at Joey before he could react, Cox stabbed him through the shoulder, pinning him to the wall.

"How do you like it, boy?"

The old man's flesh tore from around his mouth as it expanded the width of Joey's head, moving closer. The blow to its brain did nothing. He was just as fast and strong.

Joey grabbed the poker and ripped it from his shoulder. In a scream of pain, he turned and thrust it into the beast's chest. The poker impaled Fletcher Cox's chest all the way to the shaft. He felt the stale heat of the creature's breath radiating on his neck. He was glad, at least, that the teeth weren't moving.

The creature sprayed a soft mist of blood along Joey's face. For a moment, Joey looked at him in the eyes and then shoved the body to the ground. The cold marshy flesh fell against the wooden floor with a wet slap. He wiped the blood from his face then turned his head towards the noises erupting around him. The other crazed residents weren't in sight, and that worried and relieved him at the same time.

Dropping to the floor and berating himself for not thinking the action through, he vomited. The poker's hook, coming

back out, had done more damage to the gaping wound. Fresh blood poured onto the floor. A loud hissing noise filled the house.

Joey got to his feet, grabbed the poker, and hid behind a corner. A familiar, flatulent rumble came from the living room. He craned his head and saw Landon Ellery walking away from him.

Over the passing of gas, Joey heard a gurgling hiss. Not taking another second, Joey rushed into the living room with the poker pointed ahead of him. The sharp end pierced the creature's back. It roared and swiped its claws and fangs towards Joey before flopping to the floor.

Joey spun his gaze towards the front door. Mrs. Jackson and Sergeant Carson blocked the way. He looked to his left and saw a tall, white door. Only after entering did he realize it was the basement. Jamming the poker between the knob and the first step, he looked down the dark row of stairs.

A neon green light blinked from the space below. A trail of blood stained the wood leading down the stairs. The greenish glow came from a battery-powered lantern on top of a large work desk and Ms. Elkins lay under it, her arms and face shredded to the consistency of ground beef.

The cement under her was stained a dry red, evidence of the pool of blood that had been there moments before. Joey stepped closer. The blinking lamp distorted his vision, causing the shadows to grow and shrink.

Ms. Elkins' right hand gripped a small key ring. Joey snatched the keys and turned to the tall metal cabinet by her feet. Unlocking it, he flung the door open and whispered a quick, "Hallelujah."

A shotgun rested above several boxes of shells. He grabbed it and checked the chamber.

The hungry things above began busting their arms through the door. It wouldn't be long before they were on him. Joey pocketed a box of shells and held the gun tight.

A loud roar came from behind him.

Without thinking, he turned around and squeezed the trigger. The blast sent him to the floor and whatever had snuck up on him hurtling into the wall. He shuffled himself back up and rolled the lantern towards the sound of impact.

The green light illuminated a shape standing in front of him: Greta Bayless. The top half of her head was gone, leaving a sharp-toothed mouth.

The beast staggered then soared through the air towards him, jaws spread open. Tackling him, it pushed its gaping orifice closer to his head. Pieces of skull and brain tissue fell against his eyes and mouth. He strained to fend her off.

The shotgun lay stuck between their bodies.

Joey gripped the gun and forced the barrel against her ribcage. The shot showered gooey debris into the air and the creature's body went limp. Joey shoved her off of him as the monsters above broke through the door.

They fought and writhed over each other like ravenous snakes as they came down the stairs. They attacked Ms. Elkins' body first, but realizing it had all ready been drained, they rushed to the mangled corpse of Greta Bayless.

Joey, hiding behind the cabinet, saw his opportunity. He lugged up the stairs, cursing himself for not trying to get the shotgun. Back in the living room, he looked for anything he could use to block the way. He heaved a side table up against the door and pushed a loveseat behind the table.

The geriatric demons hissed and screamed at him.

"Get through that!"

A peeling brown arm broke through a gap in the clutter.

Joey realized the barricade wouldn't hold them for long. Even if he made a run for it, they would catch him. Suddenly he remembered the can of gas he had seen on the porch when Roger and him arrived. He ran out the front door, hoping it wouldn't be empty. To his relief it was half full. He ran back into the house, gas can in hand.

Pieces of broken wood and glass fell along the loveseat and onto the floor. More hands and arms appeared. Their

wailing grew louder.

Laughing manically, Joey splashed gas over the barricade and reached into his pocket for a lighter.

“Shit!”

He ran to the kitchen, the dim moonlight his only guide, and shuffled through each drawer or cabinet. His shoulder throbbed in agony. Rummaging around a pile of wrenches and tape spools, his eyes fell to the body in the next room. A pack of cigarettes bulged in Nurse Hale’s pocket.

Screams rang from behind the makeshift barrier. Joey looked up and saw it breaking apart. He snatched the lighter and hurried to the basement entrance.

Eunice Griffin climbed over the tilted loveseat. Joey lifted the television and bolted towards her. Smashing the monitor over her head, he shoved the creature back through the opening—toppling over the others and knocking them backwards.

He struck a flame and tossed the lighter into the darkness of the stairway. Something ignited but only as much as a poorly lit birthday candle. Attaching themselves to the wall and ceiling, the creatures clawed their way back towards the door. Joey, in a last ditch effort, chunked the container of gasoline through the opening. It bounced and wobbled down the stairs, splashing its contents all over the woodwork.

Flames suddenly blazed up the walls and down the stairs. Suspended demons dropped from the ceiling while others backed away, further into the basement, escaping the fire and screaming. Joey coughed as black smoke invaded his lungs. Tucking his nose and mouth into his top scrub, he stumbled for the door.

He ran back onto the porch, falling against his hands and knees. He pulled himself from the deck and onto the dirt. He pushed with everything he had left to get to Roger’s car. He yelled out into the warm night air, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Joey climbed into the driver's seat. He looked down at the ignition and laughed. The keys were inside, melting with Roger's shriveled corpse. He wiped his eyes and stared at the burning house. He thought he saw movement around one of the windows along the second story, so he opened the door and ran down the drive. Fighting against the pain and blood loss, he stumbled over the tire ruts in the dirt.

The house at his back shined bright orange, radiating warmth.

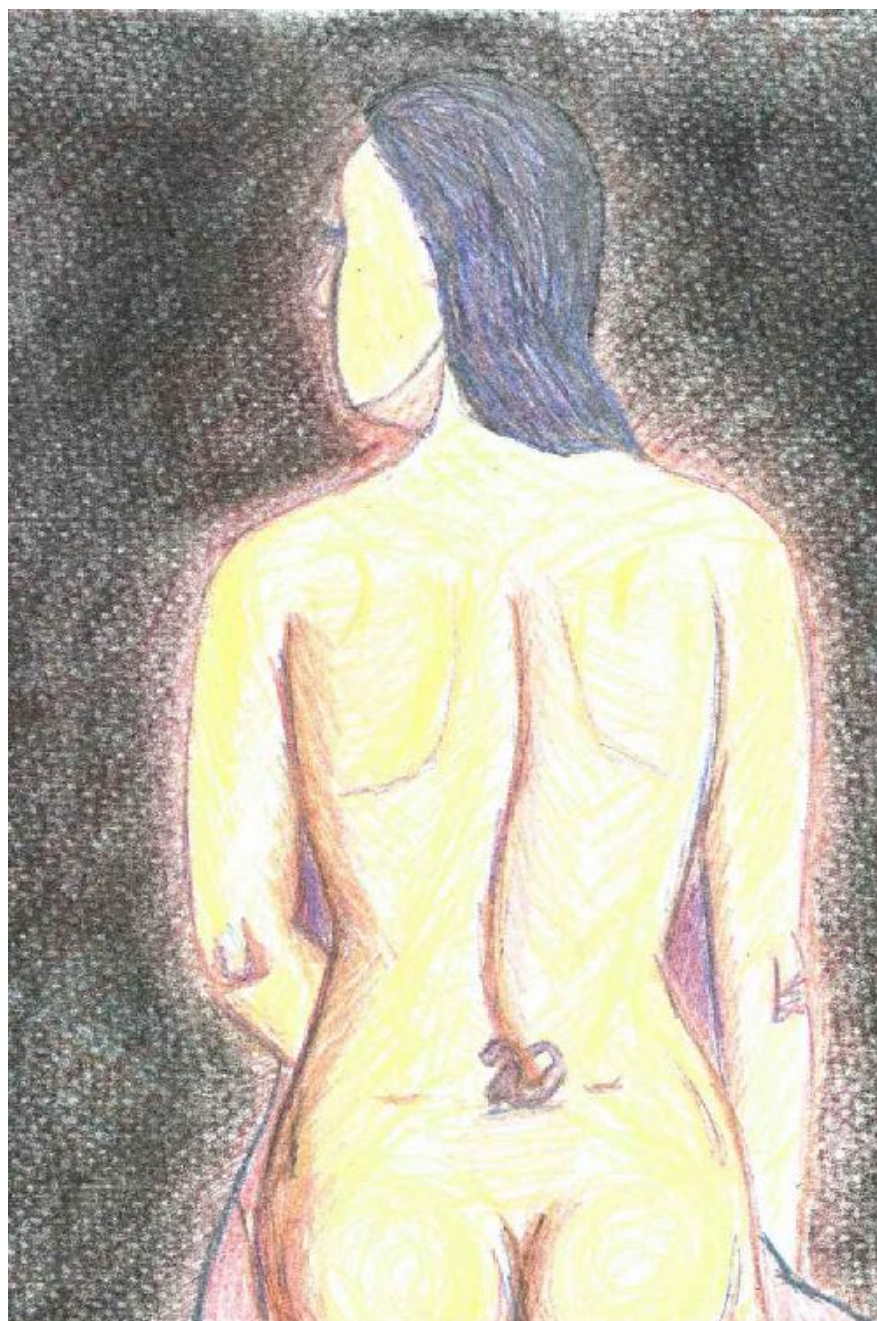
Joey fell. He tried to get back up, but he was too weak. His mind drifted to happier thoughts. A moment later, his face crashed into the gravel.

Flashing lights attacking an overcast sky. Two paramedics lifted him into their ambulance, nodding to one another.

"Don't haul him until I get a word," a brown uniformed man called to them, leaning against a squad car.

The paramedics nodded, leaving the doors open. Joey saw Sheriff's Department vehicles, a small fire truck, and people rummaging through the charred remains of Sparrow Ridge. The officer walked towards the ambulance, stepped inside, and took a seat next to Joey.

"You're in bad shape, son, but we'll have plenty of time to sort this out later. Right now, I just have one question. I know you and your friend were workin' here with Charlene Elkins. We've identified her body, Nurse Hale's body, and the ten old folks stayin' here. The only thing I want to know from you...where the hell is Roger Grubbs?"



SWEAT LIKE HONEY

RON CRUZ

Ryan forged through the crowd, retracing his steps along the streets of Olongopo, to the place he had started the evening. Still buzzing with beer, he swayed like a boat on ocean swells. Belches bubbled in his throat as he moved towards The Apple Core, the bar where he drank formaldehyde-laced Iron Horse beer that had elevated him into the ethereal haze.

Small children with dark faces and yellow teeth buzzed around him like gnats. They pushed and pulled on his belt, begging for money. Ryan kept one hand on his wallet and shoved the kids away with the other.

There were several nightclubs pushed out to the sidewalk like blisters. Little men in old jackets with shiny stitching stood before the entrances, each holding a fistful of flyers. "Joe, over here," they yelled, pulling on shoulders and boasting about girls who 'love you long time.'

Ryan jerked away and walked on. They continued yelling in broken English, but he ignored them.

He passed a toothless man he'd bought monkey meat from an hour earlier. The meat was good, and he could smell it in the air as he passed. *There would be time for more meat later*, he thought.

The entrance to The Apple Core sprouted before him. A young man in old slacks and a faded shirt offered a flyer but pulled it back when he realized Ryan was coming into the club without encouragement. "Love you long time, no shit," echoed behind Ryan as he moved through the door. The sound of the crowd and music grew louder. He descended

the tight, adobe-plastered tunnel, feeling like a worm slithering down a hole.

"Hey, Joe," a girl said, smiling. The yellow light flowing through the club sent fine shadows over her face and added dimension to her flat, black hair. *She's cute*, he thought, *but she isn't her*.

He ignored the woman and moved farther into the club. Her smile vanished as their shoulders bumped. She clawed at his chest and turned away. A luscious scent fell from her as she disappeared into the crowd.

Ryan remembered his drill instructor telling him that a Filipino woman's sweat was sweeter than honey.

"I thought you left?" a familiar voice called out.

Ryan cringed as he turned to face his shipmates, Gilbert and Martinez. A three-day liberty tour and they were still drinking at the same table. Ryan was with them when he had met the little party girl. He thought about asking them if they had seen the girl he had paid for the previous night. But how would that come out? *Have you guys seen my little whore?* He imagined them laughing at him.

"I thought you left for a little," Gilbert paused, "you know." He gave a crude smile and began to grind his hips on the table. Gilbert and Martinez laughed.

"Yeah." Ryan glanced away. "I came back to complain about the quality of the merchandise."

They laughed again, bumped bottles, and drained their beers. Even the girls sitting with them chuckled along.

"You don't even know what he said to you?" Gilbert asked and pointed at one of the girls. She continued to laugh and nod her head. "You're an idiot, huh? Aren't you? No brain, no headache, right?"

She continued to nod and laugh.

"But their sweat is like honey," Ryan said, drawing more laughter. He turned and continued towards the bar. His buzz was slipping away, and his mouth was dry. He could feel

sweat forming on his brow and decided he needed another drink.

A mamasan stood behind a podium at the end of the bar. That was where money changed hands, where agreements were forged. Behind her stood a Filipino national in a green uniform and a red beret, holding an automatic rifle.

"Where the hell is she?" Ryan yelled. "I want my girl and another drink!"

"What you talk about," she replied calmly.

"I paid for Mary. She was supposed to come to my room."

The old woman's lips parted into a smile. She pressed her moist tongue into gaps where teeth had once been and cackled a shrill, raspy laugh. The remaining teeth were various shades of brown and her breath smelled like spoiled eggs.

"So, where is she?"

The old woman continued hacking and chuckling. She pulled at the thick strands of her black and silver hair. "She not in room?"

"No, she not in room," Ryan yelled, bringing his fist down on the podium. The guard's lip curled up as Ryan leaned forward. He backed off when the woman raised her hand and shook her head.

"You very lucky." She lifted his fist from the podium. "You pay money, you get the girl. She be there."

"I'm not leaving without her."

"You go, or she no show."

"I'm not leaving without her." Ryan's muscles tensed. "I want her now!"

The woman turned her head and yelled to the man working the bar. He nodded and flipped a couple of bottles into the air. He threw ice into a glass, caught one bottle and poured red liquor, then bounced the other bottle skillfully off his head and into a large cardboard box behind him. With a squeeze of lemon and a splash of tonic, he slid towards the podium, drink in hand. The bartender picked a cherry out of

a bowl and tossed it a couple of feet into the air, placing the colorful, fizzy drink on the counter under the cherry as it landed in the glass.

"No charge," she smiled nodding towards the drink.

Ryan shook his head. "I want the girl!" he said, enunciating each word with force.

"No charge," the mamasan said once more, pushing the drink forward.

"I'm not leaving without her," Ryan smiled as he poured the contents of the glass down his throat. He felt his knees begin to shake. The drink was hotter than a chili pepper. Thick bubbles exploded in his throat, causing him to cough. He quaked and shivered and felt his head vibrate. Sweat rolled down his forehead. "Go back. Girl be there!" she commanded sternly. "You very lucky." Ryan wanted to protest, but his mouth couldn't form the words. The old woman began to shift, as if someone was adjusting the focus of his eyes. He grasped the podium with both hands and swayed, watching the woman split into two. Ryan shook his head to clear his vision. The two women grew fuzzy and popped into three. The three women floated into one, slipped back into two, and then folded into one.

"Go now. Girl be there."

Ryan tried to shake the dizziness as he wiped his forehead. The crowd in The Apple Core swayed before him like wheat in a wind. Off-balance, he stepped into the sea of motion.

The swells of his momentum threw him forward three steps and then pulled him back one. The crowd danced around him. Random girls felt his arms, kissed his face, and then fell into his wake. As Ryan moved through the crowd, sweat continued to roll over his forehead. He felt like a melting cube of ice. A warm breeze kicked in from the entrance. He stumbled for an eternity and finally made it through the exit.

The man selling the monkey meat placed several juicy sticks of jerky in his hand, hugged him, and told him he was lucky. Ryan savagely chewed the meat like a dog going at a bone.

Luckily, the short trip to the hotel was smooth. Ryan passed through the lobby and went back up the stairs. His shoes squeaked as he walked, and he distinctly heard them say 'lucky' with each step. He pushed his door open and slammed it closed, tossing the chewed-up stick into the corner. A second later, he fell onto the bed and gazed up at the yellowed ceiling. Ryan reached for a cigarette, but his arms felt much too heavy. Instead, he sank into the mattress. Everything began to spin. Then a breeze lifted the curtains.

Liberty in the Philippines, Ryan thought and smiled. Liberty in Olongapo. In two weeks, it would be liberty in Thailand, then liberty in Singapore. And there would be many lady liberties. There would be a stretch at sea and then liberty in the Philippines again.

Ryan heard a knock, and his back tingled with excitement. He rolled his head towards the door and wondered if he could muster enough strength to get up. The soft bed sucked him down and he hoped the wind would just blow the door open.

The knock came louder. Behind him, the sound of laughter echoed from outside his window.

"Damn it," he yelled. "I've been waiting! Come in!"

The door creaked open. A shapely young woman poured into view. She was dressed like she'd fallen from the cover of a magazine in tight jeans and a long, white blouse.

"You don't look like the girl in the bar," Ryan said as he struggled to sit up. The girl was full-figured and stunning. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and smiled. "You look so friggin' better."

The woman smiled, moved fully into the room, and began pulling off her clothes. Her skin was dark against the

whiteness of the blouse. She stepped out of her jeans and moved towards the bed. With her arms held above her head, back arched, and breasts piercing, she turned. A flash of brilliant color could be seen high on her bare hip as she spun.

Ryan's mouth fell open. He pulled off his jeans and shirt.

The naked girl shimmered. Her legs were long and her arms toned. Her breasts were large and her hair floated like a palm tree in a breeze. She seemed to have come straight out of Ryan's imagination. The girl climbed into bed and Ryan rolled on top of her. He placed his large American arms around her small Filipino frame.

He kissed her with aggressive lips and fumbled about her body with calloused, clumsy hands. She moved at his pace and wrapped her legs around him like a tourniquet.

Ryan found himself paralyzed on the bed, sweat soaking into the mattress. The breeze from the window was cool and refreshing. They rolled, and she flickered above him like a candle. She was pure adrenaline, working him with a combination of precision and boundless energy. Her body moved in all directions—up and down, back and forth.

Ryan trembled as a surge of energy built up. She arched her back and dragged her nails down his chest and stomach. He burst into a cry and exploded into the night. As he yelled, she laughed, and then it was over.

She lay next to him, blowing lightly on his neck and face as he panted. The room was spinning and he felt as if he were melting into the mattress. She pulled a cigarette from behind her ear and placed it in his mouth.

Ryan reached for his lighter on the nightstand.

He looked over her glistening, curvy body. Her long hair was pulled back past her high cheeks and shiny eyes. She continued to cool him with her breath. Ryan kissed her wrist. Her sweat was, indeed, sweet as honey.

Ryan held the cigarette up to her thick lips. She took it, puffed out a series of smoke rings, and then flicked it

through the window. With one last sigh, their bodies wrapped into a mass of wet flesh for the night.

The morning ached through the window bringing bright light and heat. The curtains lay still and the street awoke with the faint bustling of business and the sound of sailors' feet.

Ryan smiled. He reached for a cigarette while marveling over the evening. *Five bucks. That was all it had cost. What could I get for ten, or even twenty? She was incredible. She was*—he stopped, suddenly panicked.

Ryan jerked up and looked for his clothes, his pants, his wallet. His knees bounced painfully off the wood floor as he stumbled from the bed. He crawled over his shoes to his trousers. He knew it was too good to be true. She was too perfect. He felt the outside of the pockets, searching for a small, flat lump. *That bitch*, he thought.

"What the matter," a worried voice asked. "You okay?"

Just as she spoke, he caught his leather billfold. He stood up and moved back to the bed, body tingling and knees stinging. Ryan looked at his five-dollar angel. "Incredible," he exhaled.

She cuddled next to him, into him. Her body was warm and seemed to hug him from head to foot. Her grip was moist and her sweat smelled like honey.

"What you do today?"

Ryan shrugged, drawing from his cigarette. His mind began to work on a plan to keep her with him for the duration of his stay. He wanted to parade her past his friends. He wanted to show her off, maybe take her back to the ship for a tour. He was willing to pay more if he had to. She was worth the money.

"I want you to come with me," Ryan said. "Come with me all day."

She popped up immediately and began to dress. As she moved, stepping into her jeans, he noticed the swirling motion of color high on her hip. He decided it was a tattoo of either a dragon or snake. He watched the color swirl. It actually seemed to move. It looked to be chasing its tail. Ryan mired over her body again, while he smoked another cigarette. They were dressed and out within the hour.

Walking down the street, Ryan felt like a celebrity. He stood taller and spoke louder. He puffed his chest proudly with the beautiful young girl under his arm. The sea of sailors and Filipinos parted before them. None of the kids grabbed at his wallet, and none of the vendors tried to lay merchandise on his shoulders. The sunshine seemed brighter upon his face.

A different brand of sailor took to the streets during the day. They wore the silly hats and bought random crap. They lathered on sunscreen and never removed their sunglasses. They took a lot of pictures and picked up a few useful phrases.

At night, they went back to the ship and wrote long, boring letters to their families and wives, then slept alone. In Ryan's mind, they were wasting life.

The girl never once looked at the other men around her. She concentrated only on Ryan, shading the harsh sun from his eyes with a hand and occasionally blowing lightly on his forehead to cool him.

The people they strode past turned and looked, surely thinking he was someone important. Everyone knew he had accomplished something terrific.

The beauty on his arm was proof.

The girl told him she wanted to take him home and his head swelled. They walked away from the shore, away from the bustle of the clubs and port. The further they went, the

fewer white faces Ryan saw. The city turned into village. Small food markets replaced liquor stores.

A giant bag of rice caught Ryan's eye in a storefront window, and he pulled out his wallet. He had heard stories about families trading their daughters for bags of rice. Ryan walked into the shop, lost in ecstasy.

He felt strong and pure, enjoying a wonderful feeling of peace. He bought the bag of rice for ten dollars and a sharp five-dollar knife that opened with a flick of the wrist. He imagined cutting the bag down the front, rice spilling out to the floor, and a giant family clapping him on the back.

This is what being a man is about, he thought.

The sidewalk turned to a dirt path as they climbed the hill. Bag over his shoulder, Ryan looked back to see Olongopo in the distance. The buildings looked like small shanties.

As they drew close to her home, she continued to proudly hold his arm. Ryan felt like a rich man. He didn't live in that dirt. He didn't live in a shack.

The homes they passed were made up of aluminum sheets, dug into the hillside. Barking dogs were tied outside the doorways. He knew they weren't pets.

Near the top of the hill, she veered from the path and went down a row of small huts. She stopped in front of a hovel and opened the door. Ryan followed her into the darkness of her home.

It was bigger than he thought it would be. Ryan circled around the front room, looking up in awe. Cyclone fencing wrapped the ceiling, preventing the dirt and rocks from tumbling downward. He blinked a couple of times in the dim light, set the bag of rice down, and felt for his wallet and knife.

She pulled his hands and led him deeper into the dwelling. He followed behind her, unable to see, hoping not to trip into the darkness.

She turned to him and pulled his shirt off. Cool air greeted his skin.

“Alright,” he smiled, kicking off his shoes and unbuttoning his pants. He pulled out two fives and gave them to her as his pants hit the cold, muddy floor. Hair raised on the back of his neck as she pushed the money away.

She planted small, wet kisses in a long row from his shoulder to his chest. He leaned his head back, and waited for the room to start spinning.

“You like my dragon?” she whispered between kisses.

Ryan nodded and began to mumble promises about bringing her back to the States, putting a ring on her finger. He would be her husband and love her long time, forever. He continued his mantra of promises as he kicked his jeans away.

“You like?” she asked again.

He nodded, fumbling at her body.

She stepped back and shrieked loudly. In a flash, her figure changed. She shrunk in height and her midsection thickened. Her hair grew into thick black and gray strands, crowding her shoulders.

Terrified, Ryan stepped backwards, stumbled over a shoe, and fell. The damp mud squirmed beneath his knees like worms sliding through a corpse.

Her shrieking grew louder, and the scent of sulfur filled the air. Ryan recognized the smell from feeding the boiler on the ship.

She moved back, smiled, and disappeared.

Ryan reached for the knife. A brilliant orange flashed from the wall before him, and he spun towards the source of the light. His eyes grew wide and his spirits fell. A monstrous mouth of snapping teeth launched at him. The beast let out a giant roar and sent flames into the air. His hair singed and the room felt hotter than an engine room fire.

With snakelike movement, the creature’s head swayed. Its eyes were too far apart to engage him simultaneously. The dragon turned back and forth, alternating to catch a gaze between the angry pupils.

Ryan was transfixed, unable to run. The beast lunged.

Suddenly, he was caught in a vice that a five-dollar knife couldn't save him from. He felt his ribs snapping as he was pinched between the teeth of the most furious reptile ever imagined. Ryan let out a scream, but he couldn't refill his lungs to produce another.

Sweat like honey was the last trembling thought Ryan had as the dragon swallowed him with the sound of gnashing teeth.



HOME FROM THE SEA

WILLIAM MEIKLE

“The Irishman’s in trouble.”

It was no night to be out on the water, but it was an unwritten law in Trinity: If one of us is in trouble, we all are. I drank down the shot of rum I had but left the ale where it sat. The sea was going to be rough enough without having sour beer rolling in my gut. I went with a crowd to the dock and peered through the wind and spray.

“How far out?” someone asked.

“Just past the narrows, floundering bad and holed on the port side.”

“We’ll need four boats at least.”

The long rowboats normally took eight men, but we had to leave room for bringing the Irishman and his crew, if need be. We set out, five boats with four men in each, rowing hard into a headwind and swell that threatened to send us as far back as forward with every stroke.

It wasn’t the first time I’d been out in such conditions, but it was a first attempt rescuing a big whaler such as *The Dubliner*. I knew they’d been out for three weeks and guessed they might have even had a catch aboard. Their weight, the weather, and the sheer number of crew loomed large on my mind. I tried to ignore the increasing pain and tiredness from rowing, but I knew it was only the start of the evening’s trials.

By the time we reached the narrows, we were all spent. Matters weren’t helped much when the lead boat capsized. They were too far away from us to help them, but I saw clearly enough that all four men made it ashore.

The men clambered up to the point and waved. I knew they had a long, wet walk ahead of them to get back to the warmth of a tavern. But I couldn't waste time worrying, as I, too, had to fight the waves and crosswind that threatened to send us towards the same fate.

I was so busy concentrating on keeping us upright and moving forward that I was nearly thrown from my seat as the prow hit something hard. I turned to yell an oath at the other sailors, but my words were lost as I looked up and saw the massive bulk of *The Dubliner* looming over us.

I helped Roberts and Gallagher, two old friends, tie our boat to *The Dubliner*. We helped the other three boats so that we were all arranged in a line along the keel on the starboard side, protected from the wind. Then I started to worry. I expected someone topside to acknowledge our presence. Instead, all I heard was the whistling wind and the crashing of the waves.

"Ahoy aboard," Roberts called out. He had a bellow like a foghorn. We waited for a reply, but none came. Nothing good had happened on the whaler. And I wasn't at all sure any good was going to come out of us investigating further.

But as the saying goes: If one is in trouble, we all are. When Roberts clambered out of the rowboat to head onto *The Dubliner*, I was second in line with Gallagher at my heels.

As I climbed, I steeled myself for the sights to come. I'd seen plenty of men smashed to no more than broken puppets by the fall storms, and I expected that more of the same fate awaited us on deck.

I climbed over the gunwales and stood beside Roberts. The deck laid empty, save for a large whale carcass on the platform at the stern. My fears of finding human corpses were allayed, but I had a sinking feeling in my gut as I realized we were going to have to search the vessel.

The deck lurched beneath us as the boat was caught in a larger swell. For a second, I thought we were going to

tumble over the side, but the keel righted itself.

As *The Dubliner* steadied, more men came up from the rowboats. When there were more than a dozen men on deck, Roberts organized a search. I went with Gallagher and Roberts. We headed for the crew's quarters, while the others went to search the engine room, the mess, and the cargo holds. Four men worked on getting the vessel moving again, planning to get her at least through the narrows to quieter waters in the sheltered bay.

As we walked the deck of the rocking ship, silence fell on us like a blanket. Several oil lamps hung overhead at irregular intervals, providing a modicum of light. The lamps cast bands of shadows that seemed to cavort and caper, leading us deeper into what I feared would be our own doom.

Descending a flight of stairs, my legs felt like jelly. Every fiber of my being wanted to flee back to the tavern to get as much rum as I could get inside of me. But for the presence of Roberts and Gallagher, I might have allowed myself to succumb to the terror. My fear of ridicule was stronger than the fear of the unknown, so I followed Roberts as we went deeper into the boat.

The Irishman's cabin was empty, save for a bottle of rum on the sideboard that shouted at me as I turned away to the corridor. When we stepped into the next cabin, I wished I had listened.

We found our first corpse.

At first I was not entirely sure what I was seeing. It looked as if someone had left a pile of clothing on the floor. Then I saw the slimy trail of blood. It led in a six-inch wide strip away from the clothing, across the floor, then up the wall to where it stopped at the open porthole. As I bent for a closer look, it became all too obvious that what was left was little more than a sack of skin and bones. I couldn't take my eyes off the sight. I had no idea what could have done it. I only knew that I did not want to meet the culprit.

"I know that jacket," Roberts said softly. "It's Edward Malone."

Roberts was right. It was Ed, or rather what was left of him. A fierce drinker, a born seaman, and a man who would fight you as quick as look at you.

"There's another one here," Gallagher shouted from out in the corridor.

We found more remains at every turn but no indication as to the cause of death. We only saw more bloody trails, most of which led from the bodies to outside of the vessel.

"What the hell happened here?" Gallagher whispered.

Neither Roberts nor I had an answer for him. The silence was broken by a scream from above, a yell of pain and suffering that tore at my heart.

We headed topside at a run.

We arrived on deck to a scene of bloody chaos. Men ran and screamed, blood flew, and the wind howled while the vessel bucked and rolled beneath us. All around, beasts slithered, too fast for the eye to follow, only being still where they had affixed themselves to some poor sailor. On first sight, I took them for octopus or squid, for they had sucker-laden tentacles that they used to cling to their prey. The tentacles were attached to a head the size of a man's clenched fist.

But no squid I've ever seen had a face like that. The eyes were the worst, black pits that seemed to go all the way down to hell. The pits sat above a mouth made of an elongated tube of muscular tissue that pierced the victim's bodies and fed. The moist sucking noises reached us even above the howling wind, and that sound was the most terrible aspect.

The beasts were everywhere. Six men had already fallen, and three more feebly tried to keep the ravenous creatures away with little success. Gallagher jumped at the nearest one and tried to drag it off its victim. All he succeeded in doing was tearing a lump of flesh away from the poor man's

chest. The creature writhed and squirmed in Gallagher's hands, tentacles quickly circled his wrists and started to squeeze.

"Get the bastard thing off me," he shouted.

Roberts obliged but was more circumspect in his approach. He ran below deck and came back with an oil lamp.

"Turn your head, man," he said to Gallagher, then spilled hot oil on the beast's face. The black eyes popped, flesh sloughed away, and the creature fell to the deck. Gallagher stomped on it until it was little more than jam.

Another man, I'm fairly certain was McGuinness, the stoker, ran past us with one of the things clamped on his face. He went over the side without a sound. I ran to the rail to look.

The sea below seethed, filled with the squirming, writhing tentacles of the beasts. I saw three men bolt for a rowboat. They were caught and quickly became food for scores of the creatures, their tentacles waving, as if excited by the kill.

The beasts seemed to know I was watching, half a dozen heads turned, black eyes staring up at me. Then they moved as one, scrambling up the hull, coming straight for me.

If *The Dubliner* had not lurched at that precise moment, I would have been taken, for I was so transfixed on the creatures that I could not move. But when the deck tilted, Roberts dragged me aside.

"To the stern, man," he shouted. "And pray the lifeboat is there."

We ran, even as the things clambered up over the gunwales and came after us.

Gallagher, Roberts, and I were the only men still standing by the time we reached the stern. The sight that met us made me fear that I was not going to outlive my old mates by very long.

The sperm whale—*The Dubliner's* last catch—seemed to be the source of the infection. Its belly was vastly swollen and

distended with a gaping hole in the blubber and a nest of beasts all fighting to escape from within.

Our path to the lifeboat was blocked by the slithering mass.

"We can get to it from below—come up from under," Roberts said.

The thought of being trapped below decks with the creatures filled me with dread, but I knew that Roberts was right. It might indeed be our only chance of escape. First we had to find a safe way to get below, and that in itself was no easy task.

"We need to get off this boat!" Gallagher shouted.

Neither Roberts nor I disagreed. But the beasts blocked our way in every direction, and some were beginning to close in on us. I considered diving overboard—swimming for it and hoping for the best—when Roberts kicked and stomped at any beast in range. They burst with moist squelches and lay still.

"The heads are their weak spot. We can make it," Roberts said, pointing to the hatch leading below. "Just keep kicking."

We moved quickly across the deck, frantically stomping, leaving a trail of slime and mucus behind us. One of the beasts wrapped its tentacles around my ankle and squeezed, sending a flare of hot pain up my leg. I brought my heel down hard and the head popped, the tentacles fell limply away. I dived through the hatch after Roberts.

Gallagher was behind us, screaming. Roberts and I furiously pulled the hatch closed, just after he fell through. One of the beasts was attached to Gallagher's shoulder, biting into him, making him scream louder.

To the man's credit, Gallagher moved like someone who wasn't ready to lie down and die. He yanked the thing away, tearing out a chunk of his own skin, and threw it. The creature hit the wall, fell to the floor with a wet thud, and

started scurrying back. Roberts lunged forward and brought his boot down on its head until it finally lay still.

We stood there, covered in blood and slime, staring at each other. All around us *The Dubliner* seemed to be alive. It swayed softly, the wind echoed through hollow corridors. But worst of all, the slimy skittering made the ship sound as though it had lungs, and we stood stupefied in the belly of the beast.

Suddenly all was silent, save for the creaking of the old boat and the distant roar of the storm.

At some point in the melee, I lost my bearings. I thought we had descended to the area immediately above the engine room, but we were once again in the corridor that led to the crew quarters. And if the layout of the whaler was as I remembered, there was no easy way to get to our objective.

"Our situation has hardly improved," Gallagher said quietly. He bled heavily from the wound in his shoulder but waved me away when I tried to help. "I'll have time for doctoring later."

I looked to Roberts for guidance. He bent over the remains of the creature at our feet.

"What the hell are they?" Gallagher asked. "I ain't never seen the like afore."

"Never heard of the like, either," Roberts replied, wiping slime on his trousers. "It's some kind of squid, but I'm buggered if I know anything more than that. Besides, what they are isn't important. We need to get to the stern and fast. This boat is going into the rocks at any minute, and when that happens we're all dead anyway."

I wasn't too keen on being reminded of that fact. I looked down the corridor at the path we had to take. Even with the presence of oil lamps, it was too dark to see more than ten yards. My imagination filled in the blanks only too well. I started in that direction, but Roberts had other ideas.

"We could go further down," he said. "The most direct route is through the main hold."

"But we have no idea what might be down there," Gallagher said.

"It can't be any worse than what's above," Roberts replied. He lifted one of the oil lamps from its hook on the wall. "And the sooner it's done, the quicker we can get off this ghost ship." I followed Roberts closely, hoping his last statement was close to the truth.

We found The Irishman at the foot of the steps.

The creatures had gotten him, but not before he'd taken many of them with him. Charred remains lay strewn in a wide circle around the Captain's body. A hole in his chest showed how he had finally succumbed. It hadn't been that long, either, for the firebrand in his hand was still warm.

"He had the right idea," Roberts said, lighting the brand from the flame in the oil lamp. "We should have thought it ourselves. See if you can find more of these."

I knew from experience that a supply of brands was often kept near the entrance to the hold in whaling vessels. I found three long ones, and passed one to Gallagher. Then we lit up from the one in Robert's hand.

We had enough light to see that we hadn't just found The Irishman, we found most of his crew as well. They had tried making a stand. Some corpses lay hidden behind barrels and crates, others were piled at the foot of some stairs. Bloody, slimy trails led away from each of the dead and faded into the darkness of the ship.

The boat swayed hard, threatening to throw us off our feet. In a corner, a sea beast scurried away.

I expected Roberts to quickly head for the stern, but he and Gallagher had eyes only for the cargo. I saw that the hold was almost full. The whaler had made a profitable trip. The barrels sloshed as the boat rolled, each I assumed full of whale oil.

“There’s a king’s ransom here,” Gallagher whispered. “We’ve got to try to salvage what we can.”

Roberts laughed bitterly. “What we need to salvage is our lives.”

Gallagher wasn’t convinced, but he followed as we made our way through the hold. I jumped at every shadow, every creak of warping wood as we went forward.

When the attack came, it came from two directions. I turned towards the sound to see tentacles reaching for my face. I grabbed the brand and hit the head square on. Something hissed, and the air filled with a stench that made me gag-hot spew rose in my throat. I saw that the creature was burned badly. One of the black eyes had popped and dribbled noxious fluid on the deck. Before I could lift my foot to stomp down, it lunged at me again like a coiled snake. I poked it twice with the brand, and the flames took on the second attempt. The head went first. Tentacles writhed and thrashed in a frenzy until I brought my boot down hard, squishing the burnt remains.

Behind me, Gallagher and Roberts sounded as though they had troubles of their own. I turned to my crewmates. They had not had my good fortune of hearing the attack. A second burning beast was on the deck. Roberts was still on his feet but white as a sheet, apart from where a wash of blood ran down his chest, a gaping wound at his neck—evidence of where the thing had penetrated his throat.

“I’ll be fine,” Roberts whispered. A moment later his legs gave way despite Gallagher trying to hold him up. He fell at my feet, dead eyes staring up at me.

Gallagher headed forward at a flat run. The ship’s breathing grew harder and more intense, the swaying increased, and the slimy movements all around reinforced the illusion of lungs.

I got to the stairs that led up to the stern just in time to see Gallagher step onto deck some twelve feet above me. I flinched, expecting him to be immediately attacked, but all I

heard was the whistle of the wind and the roar of water on rocks. The vessel struck something hard enough to make me lose my footing and drop the brand. It hit the deck, snuffed out, and rolled away. Somewhere in the shadows, I heard another beast move.

I fled up the steps, praying not to be hauled backwards down into the dark.

Gallagher took no notice of me. He stood, staring, towards the shore. The lights of Trinity twinkled some quarter of a mile distant. By some miracle we had made it unscathed through the narrows and were being propelled towards the main harbor.

"We can bring her in," Gallagher said. "Salvage the oil. We could be rich men by the morning."

I was tempted. Then I saw it in my mind's eye: the taverns and whorehouses overrun by these sea demons, burrowing into drunken flesh, feeding on babes and the old alike, taking the town by storm. I could never allow it.

The look on Gallagher's face said that he was lost in greed with no thought for the consequences. I did the only thing I could think of. I cracked him in the jaw as hard as I was able. To my relief, he fell out cold. Gallagher's a big lad, but I was able to manhandle him onto the rowboat easily enough.

I left him there, took up his firebrand, and made my way back down into the hold to do what needed to be done.

It was dark; every sound, every shadow, made me jump. But the fear of what might happen to my town drove me forward. I kicked over the nearest barrel, then another, and two more, before one finally obliged me and split open, spilling oil.

The skittering sounds grew louder, but the beasts did not approach. I managed a grim smile as I put brand to oil and the deck blazed in flame.

I fled upward, fire nipping at my heels. A creature threw itself down at me from above. I caught it by the tentacles, slung it around my head, and tossed it into the flame. It took

some layers of skin from my hand as it left, but that was a small price to pay to see it burst open in the fire.

The first barrel blew as I reached the main deck, the concussion almost knocking me off my feet. The vessel shook and lurched sharply to port. I had a bad couple of seconds when I couldn't find the winch for the lifeboat, and I only released it just as a second explosion nearly tore the whaler in half. I fell, my stomach in my mouth, the boat hitting the water hard and almost overturning before I was able to get an oar in my hand.

Gallagher woke, groggily unawares to what had happened. Then his eyes burned with anger when saw what I'd done. But the anger quickly turned to terror as the sea between us and the rapidly sinking vessel began seething and roiling. A mass of tentacles rose as if tasting the air, seeking us out. Scores of the creatures had escaped the ship and they were making straight for us.

"Row you bugger," I shouted, and Gallagher thankfully did not argue.

Two more explosions racked the stricken whaler, then a third, huge blast that filled the air with smoke, splinters, and ash. When I could see clearly again, *The Dubliner* was gone, save for a mass of wreckage bobbing on the water.

The tentacled beasts swam fast and were mere yards from overrunning us. I gripped the oar, meaning to use it as a club, ready to take some of them to Hell with me.

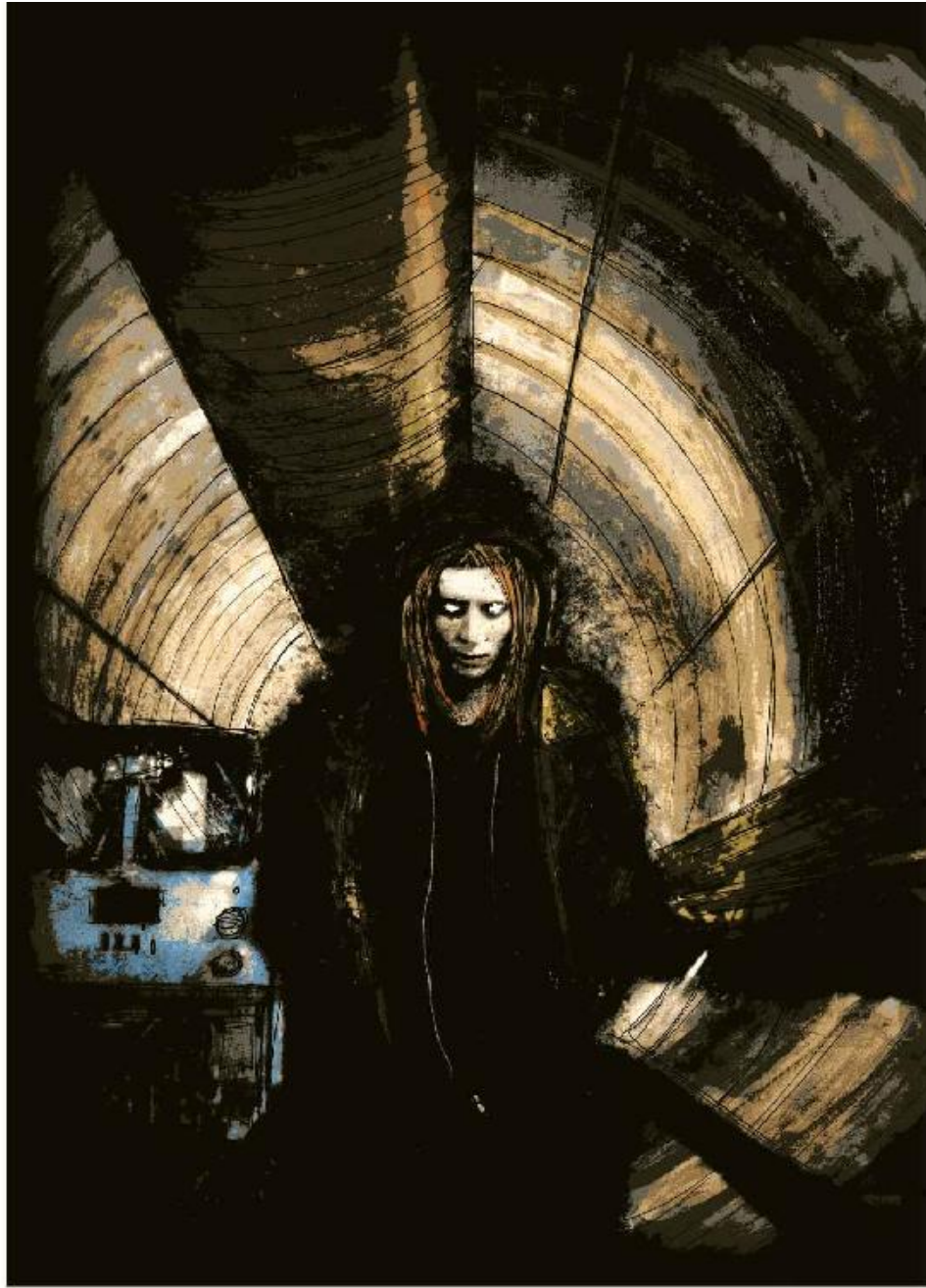
And that's when the sound came from out beyond the narrows. It was a high wail, like the one we had heard from the creatures earlier, but deeper, resonant. It sang out like a great church organ, high and clear, even above the roar of the wind. The swimming beasts stopped, their interest in us suddenly gone. Scores of mouths opened, the feeding tubes raised high out of the water. As one, they too wailed, answering some distant call. The noise from beyond the narrows grew louder, more insistent.

The beasts started swimming again. Not towards us but off towards the narrows.

“Oh my God, it’s huge,” Gallagher said.

We rowed to shore in silence. We wouldn’t speak of what we saw again, not until later in the warmth and comfort of the tavern.

“It filled the whole of the narrows.” Gallagher whispered so no one but I could hear, chilling me once more to the bone. “Their mother called them home.”



UNDER THE CITY

L. CHAN

Dave sits in the dark under the city. Strange that with the end so near, he cannot focus his mind. Every time he tries to concentrate, to hold a thought, it slips away, like those little silvery fish in the sea that he tried to cup in his hands as a child. He looks out into the black, empty space in front of him, trying to define the thing in the dark. Could he make out the shape of it, a deeper shade of nothing? He struggles at his bonds for a moment, but they are strong.

The descent began with dark spots, dark spots on the scan. The doctor broke the news in a practiced tone, equal parts kindness and seriousness. He pointed at each spot like they were no more than the 'you are here' markings on a map. He explained that the spots were endlessly hungry and would eat until there was nothing left.

The doctor tried the knife first, removing her breasts with clinical precision. Two months later, the hungry spots returned. Drugs were next, but they didn't work either. The hungry dark continued to devour her from the inside. In a matter of months, there was little left of the woman he loved. The spots grew. The doctor shook his head. Dave kept vigil by her bed until she died in her sleep without saying goodbye.

Trussed up like a turkey, Dave's face is in the dirt. His irises expand, greedy to suck in any light, yet he sees

nothing. He takes short, shallow breaths. He does not want his companion to wake. He fears hearing her voice again.

The hungry dark was replaced with a dull ache in Dave's heart. He tried to fill the void from his wife dying with friends and then drinking. Soon after, the hospital bills came and his finances crashed. Alcohol won out over his job, sloshing in the aching, bottomless pit, never quite filling it. The lawyers eventually came, rendering him homeless—a drifter moving from room to rented room. When what little money he gathered was exhausted, pissed away in the stinking alleys behind bars, he drifted from couch to couch, spending any goodwill he could scrounge from his friends and family. And one day, even that ran out.

Dave discovered a new economy on the streets: begging, stealing, conning. The alcohol stopped helping, but the streets had other delights to feed the aching dark, other crutches. He turned to drugs and lost more of himself in the bright minutes after the poison flowed through the thin metal needles into his veins.

He no longer recognized his own reflection and averted his eyes whenever his gaunt visage swam into view. Better to remember how he used to look—smoothly muscled, passably handsome. Dave never felt the speed of his descent into thievery and madness. But when he stood over a baby's pram, with the mother's purse in one hand and the other reaching out for a bottle of milk, he knew that he had hit the bottom.

Still, the aching dark asked to be filled, to be fed. The last time he saw the light of the sun, he hurt a man. An easy life had left Dave unused to violence.

The wallet on the park bench was too tempting an opportunity to pass.

He regretted it instantly when the wallet's owner, a large middle-aged man, was hot on his trail, bellowing like a bull.

The man caught him around the waist, and they tumbled to the grass together. Dave flailed wildly, desperately. Blind luck allowed him to land one heavy blow on the man's face. The fat man howled and pulled back. Dave punched. He gouged. He scratched. When his opponent was reduced to a blubbering ball of flesh, he lashed out with his legs, channelling months of anger and hate into every bone-shaking kick.

His face was known around the park. Any one of a dozen cameras would have caught him. The sad collection of people who he shared the cardboard squat with would have given Dave's name up for nothing more than a few cigarettes. He would have to go even further off the grid and wait until the heat died down, maybe even skip town.

Every breath seared his lungs. Dave paused at the mouth of a train tunnel. He thought about all the poor souls peeled from the tracks. The trains ran on a relentless schedule. Those that were unfamiliar with the rails never knew how to get out of the way in time, but they would have to do.

The great bulk stirs, shifting the still air. Is it already time? The nylon twine tying his wrists is strong. The sharp edge of the rock bites into the fibers, but it is slow work. The vigorous effort leaves his wrists raw. He can't afford to break the skin. The smell of fresh blood will only wake the beast.

Dave enjoyed the safety of the lonely darkness. The silence in the tunnels reassured him that he was not being pursued. And the wallet had money, which he found solace in. The only challenge was to get out alive. He began to have doubts after the third or fourth turn, but when he backtracked, he was confronted with even more choices, more turns, and more forks in the road.

Weaving through the city's underbelly, Dave's thighs complained from the constant punishment. The passing hours brought a rising panic. A swollen lump at the back of his throat clutched at his tongue every time he tried to swallow. When he lost all track of time, a sinking despondency set in. Even that went away when his bones told him it had been too long since his last hit. The cramps started in the large muscles of his legs and danced up and down his thighs like fire. He grunted as the spasms chased each other, then he fell to the ground.

Shakes followed the cramps, stealing control of his body. Sweat chilled him as if icy water drenched his shirt. There, in the lonely dark, he slipped in and out of reality, pain getting the best of him. Sometimes it seemed that his wife was with him. He sensed her there, sitting in the dark, smelling of chemicals, disinfectant, and death. He felt the air brush past his cheek as she leaned in close to whisper comforting words to him. Not in the sweet, musical voice she had used when they dated, but the dry rasp of her final days.

"Stay strong, little one," he heard her say. "Help will come soon."

The first strand of twine gives way. Dave presses on.

When Dave came to, a small, waifish girl was pressing a damp cloth to his forehead. Her face was lit by the dull, flickering glow of a single incandescent bulb. The girl startled when his eyes opened. She put a finger on Dave's lips when he tried to speak. Her features were hidden under layers of grime. She was young.

The girl stood up and walked to a small table. The bulb had thrown huge wavering shadows up the wall. She filled a paper cup with water from a battered plastic bottle and

offered it to him. He sucked it down greedily and cleared his throat after the last sweet drops had disappeared. The ache that had followed him through the tunnels seemed to evaporate.

Dave sat up slowly. He was in a long chamber still in the tunnels, lying on a nest of newspapers and cardboard. Some mismatched dilapidated furniture decorated the space. A guttering candle added to the weak light, but the corners and the ceiling were still shrouded in darkness.

Others were in the tunnel with him, dressed in ill-fitted, faded clothes.

Dave had heard of this particular crowd when he was on the streets. The other dregs would whisper about the people in the tunnels—an entire ecosystem in the parts of the subway where the trains never ran. The other homeless spoke of the tunnel folk in hushed tones. They passed rumors of people that vanished below, never to return.

The girl squatted in front of him, watching with her dark, inscrutable eyes. Her pale skin seemed almost luminous in the dim light. To Dave, she was beautiful.

“Thanks for saving me,” he said, reaching out his hand. “My name is Dave.”

The girl gave him a shy smile that lit up her face, the light from the bulb dancing in her eyes. She took his hand, caressed his fingers.

“They call me Flowers-in-the-night.”

“Did your parents give you that name?”

A troubled look flashed across her face, gone almost before Dave caught it.

“My parents called me Natalie. That part of me is dead now.”

“Excuse me?”

“Parts of us are always taken when we are called to stay in the tunnels, the parts that hurt and tied us to the world above.” Flowers nodded. “He said someone needed help, so we came and we found you. You are among friends now.”

Dave remembered the voice in the dark. "I heard someone speak to me when I was lost in the tunnels."

Dave slipped out from under the ratty blanket. A wave of dizziness crashed over him and he wobbled, putting out a hand for balance. He recoiled at the sight of a dark, sinuous mark on his forearm. The pattern curled around like a snake, a whirling patch of dead skin. He prodded at it gingerly, remembering his wife's cool hand in the dark, stroking his arm.

"He marked you. He marks us all when we are called to stay." Flowers raised her thin, pale forearm, pulling up her sweater sleeve. The same mark curled, undulating across her skin in the flickering light.

"Who are you talking about?" Dave asked, his voice rising. "Who spoke to me in the dark?" He had dismissed his wife's voice as a fever dream or hallucination.

Flowers looked at him, her dark eyes wide with mirth.

"You aren't ready to know, yet. When the time is right."
She turned and swept away into the shadows.

Dave struggles. He strains his ears, suddenly alert. Each stroke of the twine against the rock produces a low rasp. His heartbeat pounds in his ears. The thing in the dark...is it aware of him yet? He gets back to work, slowly, methodically. He does not want to die there.

It's easy to get used to the warm, welcoming half-darkness under the city. There was no pain or yearning. Dave's need for the drugs was miraculously gone. Flowers smiled when he mentioned it. She showed Dave the needle marks, not on her arms but between her toes. Suddenly he understood that the ache was gone and it would never come back. It had been a long time since he had space for

thoughts beyond his next meal or fix. He felt like he had a purpose—to help and to be helped.

Even after a week, Dave still had trouble remembering names and faces. The flickering light turned people into shadows and back again. He spent most of the first few days asleep, waking to find a plate of cold food. Sometimes Flowers would be in the corner of the alcove watching him, stroking the strange scar on her arm. The food was simple and scavenged from the city above: ends of loaves of bread, tins of food, half-eaten meat.

Dave's strength returned after some time, though time held no meaning under the city. He slept when he was tired. He woke when he felt rested. He learned to work again, his hands and feet unsteady. He helped by fetching water and laying out the scavenged food in the communal larder.

Flowers became his closest friend. Eventually Dave asked her to show him the way back to the surface. She brushed his forearm with her cool fingertips, and he felt a tingle. The wavering light made it seem like the scar was twisting around his forearm, straining towards Flowers' touch. She laughed, the sound high and joyous, like the tinkle of a glass bell.

"Dear heart, if you have to ask, you are not ready."

Dave had looked into the stygian beyond and thought twice about venturing out on his own. The flashlights and torches were guarded. Even with a light he would get lost in the tunnels, so he saved the thought for a different day.

Dave feels his bonds breaking. Progressing slowly but steadily, the twine separates one fiber at a time. He forces his hands down, keeping the pressure. Then he feels the scrape of the rock's edge on his wrist, and the sharp coppery tang of blood fills the air.

“Nothing topside for folks like me,” Brad said. He was a bear of a man, over six feet tall and thickly muscled. His group went aboveground to scavenge and trade. He’d been living in the tunnels for close to five years. He was one of the first few to go down.

“How many miles of tunnel d’ya think we got in the city?” Dave asked.

Brad gave a snort and thumped Dave on the back so hard he nearly bit the tip of his tongue off when his teeth clicked shut.

“Truth is, nobody knows,” Brad said. “Back when I was topside, I started out with some of the crews, digging out the tunnels for the trains. We’d have these massive digging machines that just about chewed up the rock and shit it out in chunks. Rest of us would be loading it up and carting it to the surface. At least, that was the plan. There are hundreds of miles under the city. We don’t use it all. We didn’t even dig it all. Something else did, long before we got there.”

Brad grew animated as he spoke, absentmindedly scratching at the twisting scar on his arm. Dave felt his scar itching at the sight. He sat on his free hand to stop it from creeping up to rub at his own scar.

“I remember when we busted through the thin wall. Looked like a chamber. Wasn’t big and hollow like a cave. Kinda like how we dug it—longish, for travel. Except it wasn’t one of our tunnels. Walls were smooth and old. We sent two guys in first. When they hollered, the rest of the crew followed. I stayed to watch the equipment. Nobody wants the lights to go out when you’re underground.

“Two of them came out, said there was something I needed to see. They had this crazy thousand-yard look in their eyes. Next thing I know, they grabbed me and hauled me into the tunnel. That’s when I heard it.”

“You heard a voice?” Dave asked.

“No two people hear the same one. For me, it was my dad.”

"My wife." Dave nodded. "Cancer."

Brad's eyes open wider at this news. "My dad, too. The man was still a pack-a-day when he was trying to quit. It got his lungs and his throat in the end. They had to cut a hole in him just so that he could breath. That's what I remember his voice sounding like—that funny, mechanical sound that was left. That's what was speaking to me in the dark. None of us ever talked about what we heard that day."

"But you came back down?"

"Yeah, years later. I quit, fell off the grid like you. I hadn't kept in touch with others from that day. I think some of them killed themselves. I came close a few times. Once or twice, when I got really close, when I was just a pill away from never waking up, I thought I was back under the city with the thing speaking in my father's voice. It called. It called me back...so I came."

"What is it? What's in the dark?"

Brad leaned back, his eyes taking on the glaze of reminiscence.

"I don't know what it is, but it's big. And old—older than the city. Maybe older than people. And it's hungry." Brad caught himself, snapping back to attention. He unfolded his arms, got to his feet, and walked away.

Dave's hands are slippery with blood. Warm and sticky. He feels the beast stir.

Shouts pierced the darkness in the tunnels, bouncing off the walls, coming from everywhere at once. All the people in the tunnel stood as Brad came hurtling into the light, clutching his shoulder. Blood stained his fingers.

Two others from Brad's group followed, dragging a struggling young man behind them. "Punks jumped us," Brad hissed through gritted teeth. "Don't know what the hell

they thought they could steal. This one got me with a knife. The other took off. Careful with him—that dog bites.”

Flowers stood up straight. “The tunnels will take care of the other. We know what must be done with this one.” She drifted by Dave, looking at him, her eyes dark and fathomless. “You will help.”

The young man struggled while Dave pulled him deeper into the tunnels. Dave had never been down that far. The light from the settlement faded into the distance. The darkness swallowed them.

Each footstep was an act of faith, and the quiet shuffle of feet on the dusty floor behind him reminded Dave that he wasn’t alone. The dimly lit hovels were a world away. The only things that existed were his hands, gripped tight around the sweat-slicked forearm of the interloper, and his quiet, wheezing breaths. The young man had threatened at first. His demeanor softened as the light dimmed in the tunnels. The threats melted into pleadings and the pleadings into quiet moans and sobs. All of it wasted on his impassive audience.

The texture of the air changed, and the echo of footsteps were not as pronounced. Dave sensed they were no longer in a tunnel but inside a larger chamber. Flowers’ slim fingers tapped his shoulder, and the procession stopped.

Flowers leaned in close. “You must not be afraid,” she whispered. “You are safe as long as you are one of us.” Her fingers danced down Dave’s arm, lingering slightly at his strange scars. Warm breath tickled his ear. “It’s awake.”

Dave grew aware of a stirring in the air, an uncoiling of something in the darkness, the rasp of something sliding across the dry floor. The trespasser fought to free himself, mewling in terror. He twisted wildly, seemingly powered by a primal fear. Dave felt the dull body heat of a vast thing in front of them. When the creature exhaled, Dave was enveloped in the fetid old carrion on its breath. The itch on his arm became unbearable.

The trespasser quivered and was suddenly pulled forward. Dave dug his heels into the ground to keep his own balance, then all three of them were thrown back. Dave landed hard on his side, his hands still locked in a vise-like grip around the man's forearm. The trespasser's hand twitched spastically, his fingers clenching and unclenching. Dave propped himself up on his elbow, unwilling to loosen his hold. When the struggling stopped, Dave adjusted his fingers for a better grip. He felt the ragged edge of flesh and bone, and screamed as he threw the severed arm away.

Flowers leaned in to tell Dave that they were done. Unable to move, afraid of what lurked in the darkness, he had to be hauled to his feet and nudged forward.

Free. Dave's hands are free. He flexes his fingers, quickly. The flow of blood back to his fingertips prickles. He starts working on the knots on his legs.

Halfway back, his foot hit something small and hard, the clink suggesting that it was not just another rock. Bending down, he felt the straight plastic edges of a mobile phone. He realized the young man must have dropped it as they pulled him to his death.

The man's blood was still on Dave's face and arms. The spray in those few moments of chaos served as a reminder of the beast. He shivered at the thought of its hideous hot breath, fading away in the chill of that empty space. He wanted to run then and there, but he had no chance of evading so many. And there was still the thing itself to deal with.

Dave knew what he needed to do. Once back, he patiently waited until most of the group had left their part of the tunnels. Thankfully, Flowers had taken several others into the depths to clean up whatever was left of the interloper.

Dave spent an hour pretending to organize the larder. He filled his pockets with food and packed a bag with water bottles. He planned to run until the cell phone received a signal and then call the police. Whatever the people under the city were doing, he wanted no part in it.

He ran.

The pain began as he left the dim lights behind. The scar on Dave's forearm squirmed, burning as though it was being flayed from his skin. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from screaming. He forged on. Each step ratcheted up the level of agony. It felt like someone had soaked his hand in gasoline and set it alight.

Dave, unable to take another step, sagged to his knees, defeated.

"Why do you flee?" His wife's dead voice echoed from the dark, a mocking, taunting tone. "Why do you run? There is nothing left for you above. You were running when I found you. Half dead. Broken. Spoiled. Look at you now... Running again, but to what? Everything you need is here."

The pain was replaced with a throbbing buzz, like the purr of a content cat. The thud of footsteps approached. Dave held up the mobile phone, its tiny bright screen a futile protest against darkness. Flowers appeared out of the shadows, a lopsided smile on her face.

"Wasn't what I gave you enough?" The dead voice came from her dry lips. Dave wanted to scramble backwards, but his scarred arm would not obey. Flowers was clad in a form-fitting black outfit, dark and skin tight—except she wasn't. Dave saw the light of the phone bouncing off the fine hairs on her arm. Flowers was naked. Her entire body was covered by the strange black scars.

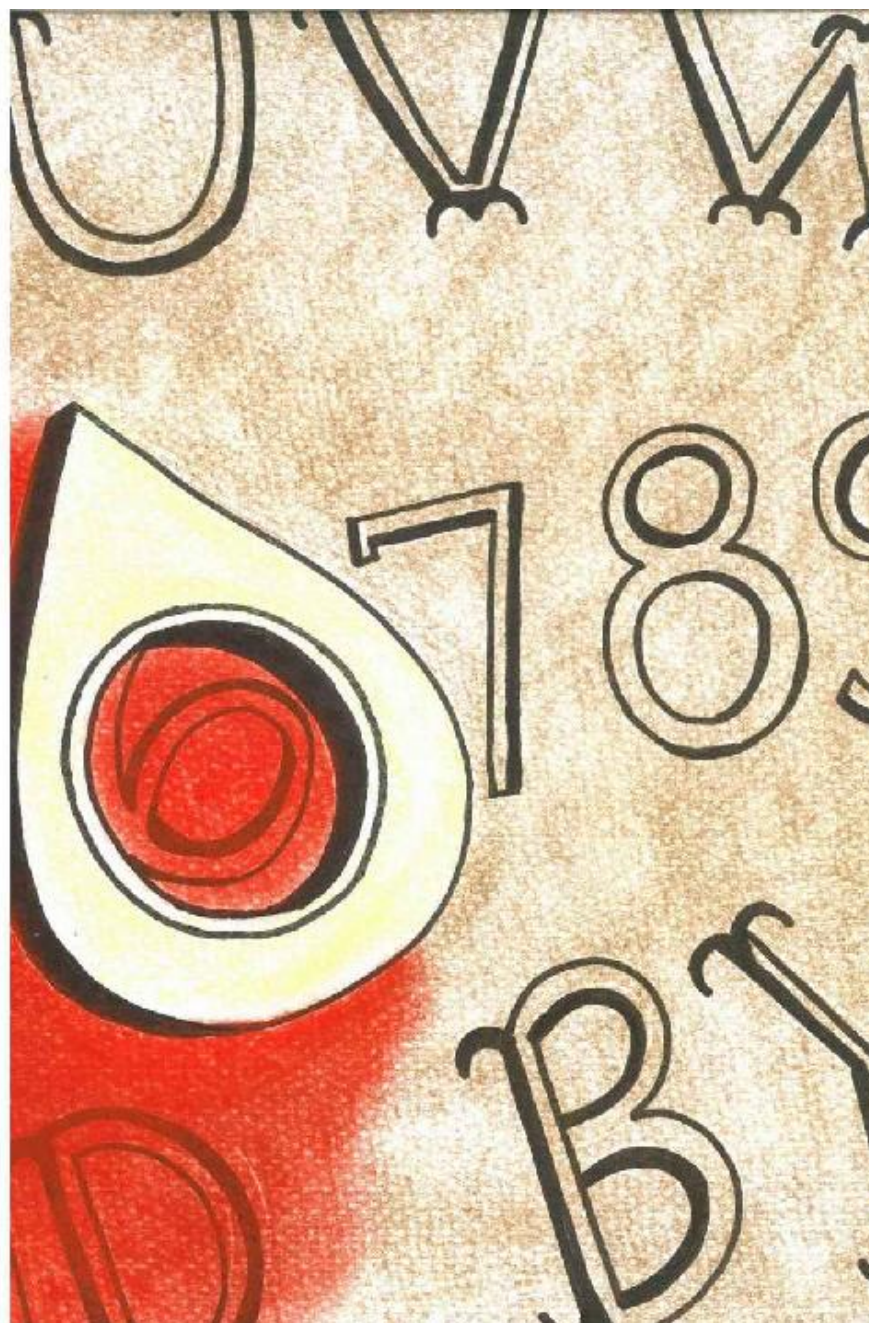
Strong hands seized Dave from behind, too strong to fight off.

"Yes, Dad. We'll bring him to you." Brad mumbled, as if replying to someone only he could hear.

As they led him back into the chamber, Dave wondered why the thing always took on the voices of the dead. He wondered if anybody had ever heard its true voice. Then he saw the glaze of madness in Flowers' eyes and had his answer.

Almost free. Almost, but not quite. Dave feels a thousand eyes on him, the eyes of this ancient entity. This terrible old one. Hungry, but never dying. Aching, but never filled. Just like the Darkness within. Its presence rolls over his skin, and the scar on his arm purrs in pleasure. His savior whispers secrets to him in its true voice, and he finally understands.

Dave smiles in the darkness under the city.



THE FALL OF SILAS GALLOWAY

DANIEL WEATHERER

Silas Galloway found life thus far most rewarding. His work provided more than enough in the way of coin to fund his increasingly lavish taste and extravagant lifestyle. A modest yet exquisitely furnished country manor, set deep within the rolling hills of Somerset, was his to call home and provided the ideal backdrop to host his latest business venture.

Personal wealth, however, was no longer the prime motivator for Silas. That had been surpassed by the craving for the intoxicating sense of reverence he seemed to generate whenever he performed. Adoration was his new drug of choice. The bulk of his clientele were grief-stricken people having usually suffered a recent loss. They were also generally blessed with deep pockets. In their eyes, he held all the answers. The payment of a few sovereigns mattered little when Silas was able to grant an audience with the deceased.

Silas Galloway was, however, a fraud. His ability to communicate with the spirit world was a mere parlour trick. He could no more speak to the dead than he could walk on water.

The idea had struck him in earnest one winter morning, long before he found his fortunes. Walking familiar streets, stomach empty, the previous night's cold still chilling his bones, he happened upon a funeral procession. A widow attired in black, and overcome with grief, had fainted directly at his feet. Clumsily, he had gathered her up and slapped her face gently in order to rouse her. The funeral

party had drawn to a halt and gasped at the apparent assault taking place upon the woman. Yet, no one had rushed to her aid.

Wearily she had opened her eyes. Silas had seen her reason and sense of duty was quickly restored.

"I am dreadfully sorry..." She had paused, searching carefully for her next words. "Sir, I am quite out of sorts today, for my husband was taken from me not three nights ago."

Tears had welled in her eyes, and she trembled as grief took hold once more.

"Your husband must have truly been a great man, for all these folk have come to pay their respects!" Silas had motioned towards the surrounding mourners. "However, my Lady, I believe although he has passed from this mortal plane, he will continue to watch over you for the rest of your days."

Surprised, for he was unsure as to why he had found words of comfort so easily forthcoming, Silas had blushed and nodded a farewell to the woman. A gentle smile had flashed across her lips, and she reached for his hand, leaving a gold sovereign upon his upturned palm.

"For your kind words," she had whispered, and with that she turned to retake her place behind her husband's coffin.

A whip lashed loudly and the horses had resumed their trot towards the cemetery.

Slowly, the idea of trading comfort for coin had begun to take shape, and over time he honed his technique into a fine art. With some basic showmanship and a warm manner, he became one of the region's finest and most respected mediums. What had begun as an innocent gesture of kindness was quickly replaced with the necessity to lie and cheat for as much coin possible, as tastes of the elegant and exotic took hold.

Silas discussed at length the possibility of using one of the famous 'Talking Boards' that were popular with mediums and spiritualists over in the United States. It was at great personal expense that Silas procured one of the first Ouija Boards to enter Great Britain.

Lady Martha Appleby, her daughter Marcy, and Sir Henry Lloyd were due to arrive at his parlour shortly. The Lady was positively overjoyed at the idea of using the new device.

The board sat positioned in the centre of the grand oak table, each letter elegantly styled, with the planchette set aside, awaiting the touch of the inquisitive. Scattered candlelight completed the mood, allowing enough illumination to fall over the table, but shrouding the remainder of the drawing room in an uneven darkness. A storm was developing off to the south, which would further add to the ambience of the evening. A sizable amount of gold was already promised to Silas, and he was confident that the scene would produce more.

The wine grew warm, and the polite small talk faded. An expectant hush befell the drawing room as all eyes turned towards the small wooden board. Each placed a finger onto the planchette, eagerly waiting for communication to be established.

"Are there any spirit persons among us who wish to make themselves known?" asked Silas aloud. A deafening silence followed.

"Ask again, please," requested Lady Appleby, shifting in her seat.

"If there is anybody with us now that wishes to communicate, please step forward."

The sound of wood scraping wood came from the board. All eyes watched as the small planchette edge its way towards 'YES.'

Lady Appleby clapped.

"He's doing that, are you not?" demanded Sir Henry.

Silas swallowed hard. He was not exerting any notable pressure upon the object. Indeed it was his plan to move it himself but only upon the third time of asking. Building suspense was all part of his act.

"Uh...no," he replied. "'Tis the erm..." He paused, his usual veneer of calm failing him somewhat. "It is a nameless spirit," he assured them.

Sir Henry looked little in the way of convinced.

Silas continued: "Are you male or female, spirit?"

The planchette made its way towards the number six. The group exchanged puzzled looks as the piece moved towards the number one and then returned back to six.

"Six...one...six...What kind of answer is that?" asked young Marcy. "I am most confused!"

All eyes locked on Silas.

"Well, my lady, one can only assume our initial question is rather frivolous to this particular spirit. I suggest we continue in order to gather as much information as we possibly can."

Sir Henry scoffed dismissively and was met with a disapproving look from Lady Appleby.

For years, Silas had led his clients into a merry dance, filling their heads and hearts with messages from the silent spirits. He felt little in the way of remorse for taking payment so deceitfully, for his customers all returned home happy.

"Do you have a message for us, oh spirit?" Silas continued, adding a little dramatic flair to the proceedings.

Again the planchette followed the familiar pattern of crossing six, one, and six.

Sir Henry pulled his hand away angrily. "'Tis a lie. He plays us for fools in the hope of keeping us here long into the night. A hunger for coin, is it not?"

The ladies removed their fingers abruptly, leaving a bewildered Silas touching the now motionless wooden tool.

“Of course not! I have merely opened the gates of communication to the other side. It is not I who decides what the spirits have to say!”

“Then prove it for us, kind sir,” mocked Sir Henry. “Ask the next question without the touch of any upon that blasted thing. If it moves, I will pay for this whole charade myself... twice over!”

Ordinarily this sort of challenge would require the use of one of his more dramatic parlour tricks. However he knew he was not the one dictating the movement of the planchette, and he was fairly confident that neither were any of his guests. Ignoring the feeling of unease that crept into his belly, he decided to take Sir Henry up on his boast.

“Six, one, six means nothing to us here, oh spirit. Do you have anything useful to tell?” Silas asked, his eyes meeting Sir Henry’s glare.

The planchette began to rotate, gathering speed with each revolution, until a faint high-pitched whistle emanated from the centre of the board.

“Oh my!” shrieked young Marcy.

“Make it stop,” begged Lady Appleby, her hands covering her ears.

The whistle increased in volume and pitch until it was barely audible, becoming a painful sensation that drilled its way into his skull. Marcy cried and Lady Appleby mouthed something incoherent. Sir Henry merely sat transfixed, eyes locked on the madness unfolding before them.

There was a loud crack, and Sir Henry spilled backwards from his chair, screaming. The whirling wooden tool was gone. Sir Henry staggered to his feet, the left side of his face a mass of blood, wood, and gore—the planchette embedded firmly into his eye socket. In a rage, he tore it from his eye with a sickening squelch, grabbed the wooden board and broke it across his knee.

“God damn you Silas *and* your parlour tricks. I will see that you pay for this!”

Spattered with blood, Marcy fled from the room screaming. Clutching his face and taking a weeping Lady Appleby by the arm, Sir Henry turned his back to Silas.

"I...I'm sorry," offered Silas, but the dark edge of the room took them from sight.

The days that followed were filled with an air of unease and anxiousness, the nights even more so. Something lingered in the air, something born unto the mortal realm on that wretched night, and there it dwelt alongside Silas. The air in the house hung heavy with dread. Food quickly spoiled, plant life wilted in a matter of hours, and guests frequented the house less and less.

Yet, Silas pushed the strange occurrences to the back of his mind. When questioned about the strong odour of sulphur that permeated the property, he pointed to poor sanitation and heavy rainfall. When the incessant scratching sounds were queried, he laid the blame on a particularly severe infestation of rats. Harder to explain still was the reoccurring 'six, one, six' that appeared etched into furniture, daubed on walls, and lay cut into Silas' own flesh.

As days blurred into nights and weeks passed with no sign of the mysterious activity ceasing, Silas became increasingly frail. Sleep seldom granted him reprieve, his dreams were haunted by screams of pain. Visions of hellish creatures scabbled towards his naked frame night after restless night, and he could no longer tell nightmare from reality.

Sunlight offered little retreat. Increasingly desperate whispers in unknown tongues filled his head. Several voices clamoured for his attention, yet all he could think of was those damn numbers. His world was crumbling and his sanity hung by mere threads.

For a man previously so stout in his belief that the afterlife was myth, Silas realized that his personal life had become a

terrifying case study into the existence of evil beyond the mortal plane.

Silas' associate and only remaining friend, Joseph Whyte, requested a small public demonstration of Silas' skills after discovering how far he had fallen in health and morale. He told Silas that he deemed it necessary to get away from the confines of the increasingly dilapidated house and the terrible influence it seemed to hold over him.

One week later, Silas feebly picked his way through the gathered throng, towards the piled wooden crates that doubled as a makeshift stage. The Last Turnpike tavern had served the residents of Beechwood since the late 1700's and on that rain-sodden night, most of the village congregated in its vast cellar for his highly anticipated public return. The air hung with the smell of wet clothes and stale beer. A hush fell upon the crowd as Silas took his place before them.

"Thank you, one and all, for sharing the spirits with me tonight," Silas said aloud, a slight waver in his voice, receiving a few appreciative nods from the crowd. "Indeed, it has been too long since I last communed with the deceased. I..." he paused, not sure how to explain the terrors that enforced his absence, feeling an unnatural breath, cold and rank on the back of his neck. He flinched, startling a few closest to him. There was a noticeable darkening within the cellar and some shuffled nervously as Silas continued.

"Lest we forget, that we, the living, have ultimate mastery over the dead!"

The sound of tearing cotton echoed just before Silas let out a piercing cry, falling to his knees.

Strips of red darkened his back and merged into one sopping blotch.

Silas screamed again; as his shirt tore once more, strips of flesh flapped wetly across his lacerated back.

The patrons fled as Silas' back opened into a bloody canvas worked upon by unseen claws.

Mustering what little resolve that remained, Silas stood up and stumbled, crashing back to the stone floor. The few remaining onlookers backed away hurriedly as Silas pushed up the stairs and into the unforgiving rainfall.

Joseph Whyte remained within the cellar, frozen with a mixture of fear and intrigue. He alone had witnessed the spectral attack in its entirety, his eyes now fixed on the blood that glistened across the crates.

Pushing disbelief aside, he hurried out of the deserted tavern after Silas.

Although the rain lashed heavily at the cobbles, Joseph was still able to make out the trail of blood leading towards the barber's quarters further along the street. The door sat ajar, broken and stained. A scream of anguish rang from within the darkness of the building. Joseph raised his lamp and moved into the gloom of the barbershop.

Another cry from deep within the shop echoed through the corridor. Razorblades and scissors shimmered in the lamplight as Joseph made his way deeper into the darkness.

Something wet and rubbery caught under his heel. He reached down and peeled it off his shoe.

"Stay the hell away from me!" Silas screamed and let out a cry of suffering that rattled Joseph to his very core.

The lamp illuminated a cowering Silas holding a razor, already halfway through the cartilage of his left ear, the side of his face a gushing mask of red.

"I can still hear them! Make them stop! Make them stop! Make them stop!" he wailed, continuing to work the razor through cartilage.

Dread overcame Joseph as he looked at whatever he had stepped on. A severed ear fell from his trembling hand.

Silas held a freshly removed body part up to the lamp, grinning pathetically.

"I can still hear them," he cried. "I can still hear them!"

Dr. Ratherford was proud of his patients. He believed in the quality of mental distress. His beloved Arlington Asylum elevated his practice from a mere hospital for the mentally disturbed into a pioneering centre of psychological research. His interest was heightened at the news of a patient's arrival, one who demonstrated signs of demonic possession. Nonsense, of course, but another prized research subject never the less. And one he was eager to get his metaphorical teeth into, considering how many doctors had given up on the man, transferring him from institution to institution.

The patient's cell lay on the deepest floor of Arlington Asylum, a necessity for some of the more vocal and dangerous.

"This is Mr. Galloway," said one of the burly orderlies. "You may want to be careful with him, Dr. Ratherford," he added, unbolting the thick iron door.

Silas, curled into a tight ball in the corner of his cell, frantically chewed at his wrist. A small pool of blood formed at his side where he rocked back and forth, eyes fixed at nothing. The walls were coated in excrement and the numbers "six, one, six" were daubed onto the dull grey brickwork. The smell of feces and copper hung heavily in the air.

"Treat his wounds and restrain him," Dr. Ratherford said. "I recommend heavy sedation. If I deem him as unfit for study, as I suspect he may well be, we'll arrange for a lobotomy."

The orderlies nodded.

Silas continued to suckle greedily at his wrist, his eyes appearing empty. He shook as though his head rang with a never-ending chorus of the damned.



BOGGED DOWN

JASON NORTON

What began as a wretched weekend for Preston Alstodt was turning out most glorious. His elation would have invariably been lost on the casual observer who did not share his passion for botany. But knee deep in the brackish muck of the Everglades—leeches, gators, and fist sized mosquitoes aside—he was reborn.

Preston had woke on the last day of class, planning to work through spring break. His Friday morning took a turn for the worse when he discovered a pipe in his kitchen had burst, his car would not start, and then he learned Harvard no longer required the talents of two fellow biologists in the upcoming year. With untold semesters to go before he could even hope for the security of tenure, Preston thought his position was threatened. He needed to publish or at least contribute to some credible research to bolster his resume if he were to have any chance of staying with the university. But he had no idea where to begin. It was all too much. Preston had to get away.

He called his contractor, worked out where to leave the key, and taxied to the airport. Five hours later, he was on a redeye to Florida.

Preston considered calling his research team, but the trip was supposed to be a casual getaway, not an expedition.

Janie, he thought.

She should have been part of his team, but she'd refused to accompany him on the last leg of his doctoral pursuit, choosing to stay in Ithaca. By sophomore year, Janie told him that she would always be his second most loved carbon-based life form. They still talked once per month by phone, but hadn't been face-to-face, or body-to-body, in over six years.

Ever since, Preston was married to his work, and he made no apologies. Human relationships had always been too difficult. Plants were easy. They lived and died. In the interim, they waged a silent war for survival, doing their damndest to choke out competitive species for territorial dominance. Emotions were never involved. There was no need for conversation or compromise. Plants were content to be alone.

Six years hadn't helped him forget. Preston was still thinking of Janie as his plane taxied the tarmac.

Preston took full advantage of the hotel's continental breakfast, then showered, and slathered on sunscreen. After grabbing a folder full of ungraded midterms, and the complimentary *Miami Herald*, he headed to the beach.

It was spring break and the college tourists that had bombarded the city still had a few more hours before they would depart, zombie like, from their hotels. Their absence left the ocean front suspiciously devoid of sunbathers.

An hour later, Preston had only trudged through three midterms. It was difficult to focus. Peeling himself from his chair, he waded into the blue-green Atlantic.

Diving under the waves, Preston made his way past the breakers. He allowed the tide to buoy him as he lay backward. Eyes closed, he floated, mentally riffling through rare orchid species. It was a form of yoga he'd first utilized years ago.

Cymbidium Sinense: indigenous to India, Taiwan, and Thailand. Found in cool climates and requires ample light with lower temperatures. Thrives in an ideal humidity between forty and sixty percent.

Cattleya Schilleriana: Brazil. Grows in cool to hot temperatures on cliff faces and in rivers anywhere from sea level to eight hundred meters above. Often used to create hybrids in attempts to breed 'super orchids.'

Dendrophylax Lindenii: first found in Cuba in 1844, discovered in south Florida fifty years later. Commonly known as the Ghost Orchid due to its billowy white appearance. Two thousand known to exist in the state. Their location mostly kept secret by researchers and horticulturalists. Considered the most sought after orchid in the world.

Preston opened his eyes at the realization, losing the poise of his float posture.

South Florida. He was in south Florida. Within forty minutes he could be in the heart of Big Cypress Swamp. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it sooner. He could find a Ghost Orchid. Bringing one back would be tantamount to sacrilege, but if he got the chance to study one in the wild—to even see one—it would spark inspiration for his next project and save his position at Harvard.

Preston dug his cell phone from his bag. After dialing information, he asked for airboat companies. He stopped the operator at the third listing. The operator connected him directly.

"Fandango Airboat Tours, best gator gazing getaway in the 'Glades,'" the gravelly voice on the other end extolled. "Moe speaking. May I help you?"

"Do you have tours going out today?"

"Sure do," Moe replied.

Preston waited expectantly. "What time?" he asked, realizing Moe wasn't volunteering additional information.

"Time you wanna leave?" Moe asked, after an audible sip and swallow.

"Aaahh, how about around noon?" Preston suggested, caught off guard at the man's nonchalance. He wondered if all the natives were as casual.

"Nah, noon's no good. Too damn hot. How about, let's say, four? Sun'll be lower," Moe countered.

"Four it is," Preston agreed. "Listen, is there any chance this could be a private tour?"

"Hell, they'll all be private today. Spring breakers don't care about airboatin'. Ain't no sex or booze in it." He paused. "Well, no sex anyway. 'Less a couple of them coeds show up and play their cards right."

Preston arrived at Fandango fifteen minutes early. There wasn't much to the place. The tiny shack had an attached pavilion that barely covered two picnic tables. An old cash register sat atop a weathered bar. Two t-shirts—one red, one black—hung on coat hangers dangling from the rafters. The sun-bleached shirts proudly displayed the white Fandango logo: an airboat driven by an oversized, bespectacled alligator, sunglasses resting on his snout.

A graying, rotund man wearing a trucker's cap with the same logo emerged from the shack. His name was embroidered on his black polo: Moe.

"Howdy, friend. You must be my four o'clock. Mister...?"

"Doctor, actually," Preston corrected. "Doctor Preston Alstodt."

"My apologies," Moe said, extending his hand. "M.D.?"

"Professor of Botanical Sciences at Harvard," Preston said, shaking the large man's hand.

"An *ivy* league plant man. Funny."

"I suppose so," Preston agreed, surprised he'd never made the same connection.

"You must be here on business, considerin' your request for a private ride," Moe surmised.

"Correct. I'm hoping to find--"

"A Ghost Orchid?" Moe finished for him. It was quickly becoming apparent that despite the man's yokel appearance, he was no dummy. "I can probably help you with that. But it'll cost a little more. How about we say a hun'erd?"

"That won't be a problem," Preston assured him, pulling his wallet from his back pocket.

"Card reader's on the fritz," Moe said when he saw Preston thumbing a Visa.

"Oh, sure." Preston fished out the cash.

"Alrighty then," Moe said, pocketing the bills as he headed back inside the shack. He re-emerged with a hefty red and white cooler in his right hand. In his left, he carried a bag of jumbo marshmallows. "Okay, professor, let's ride."

Fifteen minutes later, they were speeding through the swamp. The boat tore through a swarm of mayflies. The insects peppered Preston's face like scattered buckshot. He'd never been so thankful for sunglasses.

"Sorry 'bout that doc!" Moe yelled over the sound of the whining propeller. "Tryin' to avoid some brush on the left."

Stilted red mangroves threw roots in intricate patterns across swamp floor. Preston was impressed at how well Moe was dodging the trees.

"We only need a couple inches of water, but we can still snag anything too stout or dry," Moe called out.

The combined speed, gas fumes, and frequent zig-zagging weighed on Preston. "How much further?" he yelled.

"Half hour, maybe a little more. Your thumb ain't the only thing green right now, doc. Here, I'll pull over for a sec. Let you get your gut right."

Moe killed the throttle. Turning the propeller handle, he guided the boat into a culvert. The fan blades whirled to a stop as the boat drifted slowly.

"Thanks," Preston said, his stomach appreciative. Examining the perimeter, he spied bladderworts, water lilies, and spatterdocks.

Preston saw a trickling ripple swirl to the left of the boat. "What was that?" he asked anxiously.

"That," Moe said, leaning over the side of the boat, "is Big Al. He's a local legend in these parts."

"Al? As in...?"

"You came by that doctorate honest, by God," Moe said, opening the bag of marshmallows. "Yep. Old Al is about eighteen feet worth of gator. Most folks figure he's about sixty years old. Most gators grow to about eleven and check out. He's what a fella like you would probably call an anomaly."

Preston craned his neck. He watched Moe, trying to follow the older man's searching eyes. Something so large should've been easier to find. Staring off the rear of the boat, Moe plucked a marshmallow from the bag and held it out over the water.

"You may wanna scoot back, professor," Moe said.

Preston inched back as far as his seat allowed. He tensed, feeling sweat drip down his back.

The sun may have weakened, but the humidity was thick as ever. He'd forgotten it while the boat was cutting through the swamp, the headwind drying his skin.

Moe clicked his tongue as casually as if he were summoning a house cat. "Here, gator, gator, gator."

With a violent splash, Big Al broke the water, lunging upward for Moe's outstretched arm. The gator's moss green head was easily the size of a curbside garbage can. Its yellowed teeth, thick as fingers, gnarled like splayed barbed wire.

Big Al unhinged his bottom jaw so wide that it looked as if he could swallow Moe whole. At the last possible second, the old boatman dodged backward, letting the marshmallow fly. The gator snatched it from the air and fell back into the water, sending a swell under the boat that nearly capsized it. Preston pitched backward on the vinyl seat, clutching it tightly.

Moe cackled. "Ya' alright, doc? Man, you shoulda' seen your face!"

Preston couldn't speak. He really wanted to, so he could ask Moe just what the hell was wrong with him and why he would endanger both their lives for such a stupid stunt. But his lips wouldn't work.

Moe offered the bag to Preston. "Your turn. Give it a shot?"

"N-no. No, th-thank you," Preston stammered. His eyes were wide as he frantically scanned the water.

"Suit yourself," Moe said. "Don't know what you're missin'."

"Is...is he coming back?"

"Not unless I offer him another."

"Please don't," Preston begged.

Moe chuckled. "I'm sorry, doc. It's just a gag I use with the tourists. They get a kick out of it. Course I usually don't do it with Al. He can be a little intimidating."

"Genghis Khan was a little intimidating. Big Al would've made him soil his fur-lined panties," Preston said dryly.

Moe grinned, reached into the cooler, and popped the top of a beer, shoving it at Preston.

"Have one. It'll calm your nerves."

Staying low, Preston took as few steps as possible to accept the offer. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't worry, she ain't gonna' tip over," Moe assured him. "Tell ya' what. I'll get us back out into the main and we can troll a bit before we pick up speed again."

"Great."

Moe fiddled with buttons on what Preston recognized as the engine. Pulling a ripcord, the fan blade spun to life. He reached for the rudder, gently guiding the boat into the open swamp.

Preston sipped his beer. It was bitter. He studied the label: Swamp Ape IPA.

"It's brewed up in Melbourne," Moe said.

"It's good," Preston lied.

"Bet your ass it is. Just like everything in Florida, 'cept the damned Cubans." Preston shot him an uncomfortable glance. "No offense," Moe quickly added.

"None taken."

Preston pulled his cell phone from his pocket. Eleven minutes after five. "How long until the orchids?" he asked.

"Depends how you're feeling," Moe replied.

"I'm good. We can pick up speed anytime."

"Relax, doc, enjoy the scenery. You ain't payin' by the hour, and you're still looking a little green."

Preston swatted a mosquito from his neck, wishing he'd stopped for repellent.

"The Spanish were the first to ever map the 'Glades, though they hadn't even seen it," Moe began speaking in full tour guide mode, just loud enough that Preston could still hear him over the sound of the engine. "They knew there was somethin' between the Gulf and the Atlantic, but they didn't know exactly what. They named it 'Laguna del Espíritu Santo: Lake of the Holy Spirit.'"

"Right. I read that in the brochure," Preston said.

"The primary vegetation here is obviously sawgrass, which has some interestin' characteristics. For example, sawgrass leaves will burn--"

"But not the submerged roots," Preston said. "It's how the sawgrass survives all the fires caused by lightning strikes."

"Sharp cookie," Moe said.

Preston smiled. "That is kind of my area of expertise," he said with an air of pride.

"How about a little history lesson then?"

"Please," Preston said, less anxious.

"I'm sure you are familiar with the Lost Colony of Virginia?"

"Sure. They were the last members of modern day North Carolina's Roanoke Colony who disappeared. When other settlers came looking for them, they found all their homes and buildings dismantled. The only clue to their disappearance was the word 'Croatoan' carved into a nearby tree," Preston said, as if he were lecturing back at Harvard.

"What happened?" Moe asked.

"Well, there are two theories. Some scholars believe the group was signaling that they were relocating to Croatoan Island, what we now know as Hatteras Island."

"And the other theory?"

"The colonists were trying to point to a tribe that abducted them. That's highly unlikely, though," Preston said, leaning into the boat as it cut to the right.

"You think so?"

"How would someone have the wits or the time to carve something like that into a tree during a mass kidnapping?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised what fear can do," Moe said, finishing his beer. "What if I told you we had our own little lost colony right here in the 'Glades?"

"I didn't realize there were colonists here."

"Not colonists, per se. Indians. I mean Native Americans."

"Go on," Preston said, setting his empty Swamp Ape bottle in the bottom of the boat. Moe tossed him another.

Moe cleared his throat. "Initially, there were two major tribes in the 'Glades: the Calusa and the Taquesta. The Calusa were the big boys. Several thousand of them lived here. But they suffered attacks from an invadin' Yamasee tribe from the North. Less than a thousand survived. Most fled with the Spanish explorers who relocated them to Cuba.

But when disease started killing them off, they moved to the Keys.

“The Taquesta were supposedly a peaceful bunch. But the Spanish were scared shitless. Said the Taquesta ambushed their sailors who ran aground in the ‘Glades and would torture ‘em to death. Half a decade later, Spanish priests tried to build missions along the coast, figurin’ they may be able to convert them. Turns out another invading tribe, the Yucchi, took care of that problem instead. Between them and the Seminoles, the Taquesta were nearly wiped out. ‘Round 1770, a British historian found most of their villages leveled. Legend has it that the final thirty surviving Taquesta were deported to Havana. Most folks around here don’t believe that though.”

“So what do they think happened?” Preston asked between swallows.

“Nobody really knows. But this flower you’re looking for? The old timers ‘round here swear those dead Indians’ spirits are what gives those things life.”

“So you’re saying the Taquesta put the ghost in the Ghost Orchid?” Preston said, feebly suppressing a grin.

“I’m just tellin’ you what folks believe. That’s why they say those orchids are so rare, so special. They think the Taquesta’s spirits inhabit the orchids and protect them. Sort of the last piece of their property that they don’t want to lose,” Moe explained.

“Well I’ve heard some interesting theories on plant development, but that’s a new one to me.”

Moe revved the throttle gently and motioned for Preston to ready himself. “All I know is that you don’t get to be old by being stupid.”

As the time passed, the beer proved to be a double-edged sword. It undoubtedly helped make the trip more enjoyable,

but it seemed to have stolen Moe's recollection of the orchids' location. Preston cut himself off at three.

He wanted to be lucid when—*if*—they found the orchids. He'd lost count of how many Moe had finished, or how many times he'd followed dead ends. Still, his control of the airboat seemed unfazed.

Preston took out his cell phone to check the time, but the battery was dead. The last thing he'd seen on it was a notification of a voicemail from his contractor. He'd simply replied 'fix it' in text. He estimated that it was close to eight o'clock. The sun had set about a half hour earlier, and twilight streaked the sky.

"How much longer?"

"I'm pretty sure they are just up around that bend there."

Preston followed Moe's gesture, spying the outline of a tiny outcropping.

"Yep, won't be long now."

Preston restrained his anticipation. Though Moe had been good company, his navigational track record had proven less than stellar.

The time hadn't been a total waste. Talking about the Everglades history was the lengthiest conversation he'd had with anyone. Not even talks with Janie. And there she was again—right where he'd left her, waiting in the back of his mind.

Moe idled the boat into the cove. "We're here." He gestured towards the sawgrass before them. "May I present the Florida Ghost Orchid."

Hundreds of Ghost Orchids—as white as they were in every picture Preston had seen—danced in the gently lapping water. He was moved to tears.

"You okay, professor?"

"My God, there are so many. There were only supposed to be two thousand in the state," Preston said, his attention unwavering.

“Well that may have been all they’ve found, but that don’t mean that’s all there is. When you’ve been running the ‘Glades as long as I have, you learn a few secrets.”

Moe eased the boat closer, allowing Preston a better look. “There’s enough ground there to walk right out and touch one.” He pointed to the twenty feet of mud-covered bank in front of the boat.

“Seriously? Aren’t there gators out there?” Preston asked, captivated by the opportunity.

“Hell doc, there’s gators everywhere around here. Just don’t stay too long. I’ll keep the light on and holler if I see anything.”

Preston tossed his wallet and phone in the boat, then eased his way out onto the marshy beach. He swapped his vision between the orchids and the watery slop that came up to his knees in case Big Al, or his cousins, chose to make an appearance. But there, that close, he was more excited than afraid.

He reached out and cradled an orchid. Its petals, sepals, and lobes all fluttered in perfect unison. Its fluted stigma stood proud, displaying elegance amongst strength. “My God,” Preston repeated, laughing joyously. “Moe, you have got to come see this up close! This is unbelievable!”

“No thanks,” Moe said. “I’ll pass.”

Preston heard the boat’s motor start back up, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the orchids.

“Alright, doc. It’s been real. Second thought, stay a while. I think you’ll like it here,” Moe called out as he opened the engine full-bore.

Preston turned. The shrill hum and sudden gust of the fan disrupted his stupor.

He lunged after the reversing boat, taking two steps, and then plummeted face first into waist-high water. Panic and confusion overtook him. He tried to swim after Moe but was tossed aside by the boat’s churning wake. Preston screamed, begging Moe to return until he lost sight of the

spotlight. Terrified and alone in the blackness, he slid back through the ooze to the company of the orchids.

Scratching blindly in the muck, Preston scrambled as high on the bank as possible to escape the reach of any gators. He found the root of a mangrove and held on for dear life, trying to get his feet on land.

A guttural murmur came from the left. He froze and listened. A moment later, it warbled again, louder. An echo answered from behind him, followed by another. Within seconds, terrifying sounds surrounded him. Preston tried to run but tumbled back into the marsh. He stayed under for as long as he could, hoping the noise would be gone when he resurfaced.

For a moment, the noises sounded like a language. An ancient, lost language unfamiliar to Preston. He rose from the water, working towards the shore, then stopped dead in his tracks. The glow of tiny red dots danced in the darkness. They bounced within yards of him before disappearing. Suddenly the small pair of lights came back, joined by other pairs.

Eyes, Preston thought. He stood, water seeping into his very core. Dozens of different colored eyes stared at him—glowing yellow, orange, and red.

Something brushed past his legs, snapping him back to reality. He thrashed in the water, trying to find the mangrove to back against. Silence and stillness returned. All the eyes disappeared.

Taking a deep breath, Preston clambered up onto the roots of the tree. He had imagined it all. It had just been some type of a fish against his leg and fireflies in the trees. Moe's stories had gotten the better of him, but it wouldn't get the best. He was a man of science, after all.

Suddenly, dozens of moss-covered hands reached up, took hold, and pulled Preston beneath the liquid black. He thrashed, kicking and screaming, his bubbling voice sounding much like those of his now screaming tormentors.

Reds, oranges, and yellows flashed around him as he was pulled into the bowels of the swamp, mud and water filling his nose, eyes, and lungs.

Preston ceased struggling as the strong hands gently guided him deeper into the mud. When he opened his eyes, he could see clearly. Everything was in shades of yellow.

Vines snaked around him, piercing his flesh in excruciating precision. Slimy vegetation slithered down his throat, nesting his organs in floral incubators. Roots slowly replaced his bones.

Preston heard the process in his mind—the sentient screams of his dying cells and the triumphant battle cries of the new organisms conquering his body. Then came the voices of his brothers, warm and inviting, as they began to hoist him from the murk. He finally understood them all.

Still, he tried holding on. He tried salvaging what was left of himself—of Preston.

Why resist? he wondered. All his fears were fading. This was everything he had ever wanted.

Preston wasn't alone anymore. But then he thought of Jennie...Jamie... Janet...Jan...what was it again?



SIX CROWS

DANIEL DAVIS

"There were six crows on that telephone wire."

Rick glanced at his wife who still had her face pressed against the passenger side window.

"What?"

"On that telephone wire back there. There were six crows."

Rick struggled for something to say—a witty comment or resentful retort. Instead, he grunted and returned his attention to the road.

After a few seconds, Marie looked at him. "Did you hear me?"

"You mean about the crows?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I heard you."

"Don't you think that's odd?"

Rick tried to find something in her eyes—some proof that she was baiting him. Some sign that she was trying to make him look like a fool in front of their daughter again.

What he saw made him frown: Marie looked worried.

"What's wrong?"

"There were six crows on that telephone wire," she repeated.

Rick swallowed, turned back to the road, and watched as one telephone pole replaced another. He felt Marie's stare but not in the way she used to look at him. In the beginning, it had been sexy. Now, it was annoying.

Carefully he said, "I don't get it."

"Didn't you ever hear that rhyme?"

"Apparently not."

"My grandmother taught it to me when I was little. She learned it when *she* was little, back in England. I don't remember it exactly, but it said that different numbers of crows meant different things. Like, three crows would bring you good luck, or something."

"Does six crows mean we win the lottery?"

In the back seat, Chelsea giggled.

Rick glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Thanks, honey. Daddy loves to have an audience."

"Rick!"

"Yes, dear?"

"Six crows are unlucky. *Very* unlucky."

"Uh-huh." Rick didn't have to fight back the laughter. After seven years, he simply knew better than to laugh.

"That was the *fourth* grouping of six crows that I've seen in the past hour."

"Good thing it wasn't the *sixth* group, then we'd really be screwed."

"You don't think that's a little disturbing?"

"Marie, what I think is that your powers of observation are astounding. You managed to count how many crows were grouped together on a telephone wire while passing them at sixty miles per hour. Not only that, but I didn't even see the damn things."

"Are you saying I imagined it?"

He couldn't help himself. "No. I'm saying only you would care."

"Rick..." she let her voice trail off. The one good thing about their marriage: They had learned when to pick their fights. Whenever Chelsea was around was not an appropriate time.

Still, their daughter could sense when something was wrong. In the rearview mirror, Rick saw Chelsea facing out the window, her eyes squinted. He knew how awkward it

was, trying to distance herself from the tension in front of her. He remembered feeling that way as a kid. It had been hell.

Returning his attention to the road, Rick wondered how much further they had to go before they got out of Nebraska. The atlas was in the backseat, highways highlighted in orange and pink indicating an intricate pattern across the country. Perhaps the scenic drive hadn't been the best choice. It was taking far too long and the Rockies wouldn't be in sight for another day or two, at least. The Interstate wouldn't have offered as many interesting detours—just the typical tourist destinations—but it would have gotten them there quicker, and more efficiently. Rick found the two-lane highways, at least during stretches through fields of wheat, corn, and hay, boring. He felt drowsy and out of it. In a couple hours, he had to turn the wheel over to Marie, who was, if nothing else, a competent navigator.

At least the weather was in their favor. Two days earlier they had found themselves driving through a severe thunderstorm. Chelsea had been in tears, worried about tornados. Rick had placed the idea in her head, then spent most of that hour mentally berating himself for it. Marie had to pull over, give the wheel over to Rick, and climb into the back with their daughter. She hadn't chewed Rick out that time. They'd both known it had been his fault. Marie had always been an artist with guilt; she knew when to lay it on and when to let it creep up at its own pace.

The day was pleasant. Perhaps that was because the car was air-conditioned. Rick had experienced some horrible summers on the East Coast, but nothing prepared him for the barrenness of the Midwest. There were no trees, hills, or skyscrapers to block the sun. The heat was not a byproduct of the sunlight. It *was* the sunlight, unfiltered and uncompromising. The grass could take it. The grass and wheat were light enough to catch what little breeze blew

across the fields, to sway in its brief reprieve. But a man standing out there would feel nothing but the blistering heat.

We're in the middle of God's asshole, Rick thought, laughing. Marie's grandmother had been good for more than counting crows. She'd been a delightful dinner table conversationalist with enough witticisms to start her own quotations dictionary.

"What's so funny?" Marie asked. Rick noted that there was no hostility in her voice, only mild curiosity.

"Nothing," he said. "You just got me thinking about Helen."

Marie smiled. "You hear that, Chelsea? Daddy's thinking of Grandma Miller."

"Grandma Miller," Chelsea said in a low, throaty growl, an imitation of a voice roughened by too many cigarettes.

"That'd be her," Rick said. "She of the varicose veins and halitosis."

"What's that?"

"You'll find out in a few years, sweetheart. We'll also have to discuss hernias, hemorrhoids, and crow's feet."

Instantly, Rick regretted what he said. He glanced carefully at Marie. Yes, the amusement was gone from her face, but her smile remained.

"Do you remember her chicken and dumplings?" Rick asked, rushing the words out faster than he should have. "Good Lord, I could've lived off them."

"And her banana cookies!" Chelsea said from the back seat.

"Yeah, those too. And her raspberry pie." Rick added, smiling.

Marie winced. "Ew."

"Hey, you liked it."

"I *pretended* to like it to make her happy," Marie said.

"I call BS, dear. You ate it with gusto. You stopped liking it when *you* tried out the recipe," Rick told her.

"She always said the main ingredient was love."

"Doesn't mean you should skimp on the salt."

"I just thought we should try eating a little healthier," Marie said. "You didn't like the spare tire you were getting, remember?"

"Sorry I don't make enough to afford a gym membership."

"Daddy? What's that?"

Rick glanced into the rearview mirror. Chelsea was pointing out the windshield. He looked forward.

Rick slammed on the brakes at the sight of something shiny in the middle of the road.

"Shit!" Rick jerked the steering wheel to the right. The Toyota refused to turn with him. The car left the road, hit the gravel, and then drove headfirst into the ditch that separated the highway from the fields.

The car came to a halt, the back bumper a couple feet higher than the front. Rick stared out the windshield at the tall grass just a few feet in front of him, swaying back and forth.

"Damn it." He put the car in reverse. The wheels spun.

"Rick..."

He tried again.

"God damn it!"

"Rick!"

He glanced at his wife. She placed a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Honey, turn the car off."

He stared at her for a moment then did as she asked. He couldn't think of anything else to do.

Marie unbuckled her seatbelt. "Chelsea, honey, are you alright?"

"Mommy!"

Rick ripped his seatbelt out of the buckle and turned around. Chelsea appeared to be okay. She was frightened, more so than she had been a couple days ago during the storm, but otherwise unharmed. Comfort was Marie's department. His wife had always been good with that.

"What the *fuck* was that?"

"Rick!"

"Jesus, I'm sorry."

Marie, who had climbed into the back seat with their daughter, glared at him over Chelsea's tangled blond hair. "I don't know what it was. Maybe you should've been watching the road!"

Chelsea's crying kicked up a notch.

Rick focused his attention at the hay field. A retort sat at the tip of his tongue, but she was right. He *should* have been watching the road. He wiped sweat from his face and, as he did, he noticed stubble grating against his palm. He took off his glasses and rubbed his temple.

He racked his mind trying to figure out what he could do. Rick turned the car on and immediately cool, brisk relief filled the vehicle. He angled a vent directly on his face. He needed a second to cool off and collect his thoughts.

After a few moments of silence, Rick calmed down, Chelsea's sobs subsided, and Marie's panting slowed, though he still felt her stare. The argument would be moved until later, reserved until they checked in to the next motel. That suited him just fine.

He looked in both side-view mirrors, trying to see the object he'd run over. All he saw, though, was sky.

"I should check how bad it is," he said. "See what we hit."

Marie didn't say anything. By the way her jaw clenched, he could tell she wanted him out of the car. He couldn't blame her.

Rick opened the door and stepped out, falling a few more inches than he expected. The heat didn't hit him as much as engulf him. As soon as he was outside the Toyota, the air-conditioning became a distant memory. The sun, beating down on him with no clouds to absorb the blow, became everything.

He shut the door behind him, purposely refusing to look into the backseat, as he checked to make sure none of the

tires had blown, then scrambled up the ditch and onto the highway.

The object that had caused him to derail the trustworthy Toyota lay a few yards down the highway. Rick shambled over to it. He stared at the object, cocking his head to the side, trying to figure what it was. Some piece of metal, maybe from a tire or muffler.

Awful shiny muffler, he thought.

It wasn't anything. Just an anonymous piece of thin metal, a few inches long, with one sharp end. He picked it up, turned it over in his hands, and threw it into the field.

Fuck it, he thought as he walked back to the car.

Marie rolled the window down in the back. "What did we hit?"

"We didn't, thank God."

"Well, what was it?"

Rick shrugged.

She rolled the window up and turned back to their daughter.

He stood at the back of the car thinking about how hot it was and how tired he was from driving. He knew he would have to push the car on top of everything else. To that purpose, he hollered to Marie, "Pop the trunk!"

She did, and he began taking out their suitcases and setting them safely aside. He didn't know if it would help at all—probably not—but it gave him something to do while he prepared himself for the labor ahead.

Once the trunk was emptied, he slammed it shut and walked back to the driver's side. As he climbed into the car, the air-conditioning caressed his skin. His sweat dried almost instantly, leaving him shivering.

Rick relished every second of it, leaning back in the seat, eyes closed.

"Everything okay?" Marie asked.

He opened his eyes as if waking from a deep sleep. Part of him hoped to see the road, a gas station, or a hotel. Instead,

all he saw out his windshield was hay.

He turned around in his seat. Marie was no longer holding their daughter. Chelsea sat beside her, flipping through one of the books she'd brought. Her eyes scanned the page intently. Rick felt a moment of pride watching his daughter read, thinking perhaps she may even become an English teacher like him, although, hopefully she'd wind up somewhere more prestigious than Clarkview Middle.

His eyes shifted from his daughter to Marie, who glared at him with furrowed brows. "What are we going to do?"

"I need to push this car out of the ditch."

"Can you do that?"

"If you're sitting here with it in reverse...yeah, probably."

"Can't you just call a tow truck?"

"I thought you said we don't have any reception out here?"

She sighed. "The phone's there beside you. Check."

Rick picked up the phone. "No signal."

"There's gotta be a farmhouse around here."

He coughed. "Wanna get out there and search for it? Probably miles down the road either way?"

"How about flagging someone down?"

"How many cars do you remember us passing?"

"I don't know."

You can count crows, but not cars.

"I counted four. That's four, in the past two hours. This isn't a highway so much as it is a skid mark. We're alone out here."

She smiled at him. "It's scenic though, isn't it?"

"Maybe Chelsea should go up to the road and see if she can wave down a busload of cheerleaders or something?"

Chelsea giggled. "Okay, daddy."

Rick smiled.

The three of them stepped outside the car. Marie gasped in the heat. Rick was surprised how much his body seemed to have forgotten it so quickly.

We ain't in Kansas anymore. Though, it looks about the same.

As Chelsea disappeared over the hill, Rick called out, "Make sure you ask those cheerleaders if they have any beer with them!"

"Okay," she called back down, laughing.

Marie turned to him. Out there in the sun, she looked her age. Not that she was old, neither of them were old, but she wasn't a young coed anymore, either. She didn't have a twenty-year-old's body or grace. Certainly no college girl had those crow's feet. The sunlight seemed to highlight the creases in her face, the imperfections in her skin. He figured it was doing the same to him, an equal opportunity humiliation.

She pulled her hair back and let it fall limp against her shoulders.

"God, it's hot."

"You said it," Rick agreed.

Marie looked up to the road. "She's okay up there, right?"

"She's better than us." He nodded. "We've got work to do. When I pound on the hood, throw it in reverse. Don't stomp on the pedal. Just let it down gradually. I wanna see how this thing's gonna react."

Marie got in and closed the door. Rick heard the soft purr of the automatic window rolling down as he walked to the front of the car. He leaned against the hood, putting some force into it. The car rocked. The push would take a lot of time, and he would be far too exhausted to drive to the next town. *Marie could, though, assuming that there even is a town.*

"Of course there's a town," he muttered.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Sorry, this fucking heat. Remember, when I pound on the hood, throw her in reverse."

"I was paying attention."

Amazing the patience you learned after seven years of marriage. They'd been together two years before that, but patience had never really been a part of their relationship. They'd been too busy with school and sex. There *had* been love, of that he had no doubt. But love had complicated things. The first year of marriage hadn't been much different. They'd lived together before tying the knot, so they became accustomed to each other's bad habits. Even when the baby came, things had been going strong.

When had it gone downhill? he wondered. *After the move?*

Clarkview wasn't the city. They had agreed the city wasn't the place to raise Chelsea. That was one of the few things they *still* agreed on. But Clarksvew wasn't exactly the suburban life that Marie had in mind. Maybe they would have been happier elsewhere.

Rick couldn't come up with a specific moment when he realized his marriage was ending. It was as though he'd always known it, which wasn't true at all. As a kid, watching his parents' marriage fizzle then explode, he'd promised he would never do the same thing. He would marry for life. And he had. He really had.

He caught his mind trailing, wiped sweat from his forehead, and slammed his palm onto the hood. After he heard the engine accelerate, he pressed his shoulder against the front grill. Marie put the car in reverse and revved the engine. The car moved an inch or two but quickly settled back in place.

Marie leaned out the window. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Yeah! Just...give me a second."

"You really think you can push this thing up from here?"

"Yeah. I can do it."

Rick pounded on the hood and placed both hands against the grill of the car, wincing at the radiating heat. He pushed hard as Marie revved the engine, and the car moved a few

inches, enough for him to step forward. He pushed again until his foot slipped in the grass, and he fell.

"Fuck!" he yelled as his cheek contacted the hot steel.

Rick slid to the ground, grateful he didn't pull anything on his way. He rested against the bumper, breathing heavily.

"You okay?"

"I'm alright. One more go?" he said as he stood and prepared to push once more.

It actually took three more tries. Inch by inch, they maneuvered the vehicle into a better position. By the end of it, Rick stripped his shirt off and was covered in sweat and grime. Marie reversed the car the rest of the way from the ditch until the tires finally took hold, and the car jerked backwards. As he climbed the small incline, Rick fell again, but this time softly into grass and dirt.

Rick heard Marie exit the car and call for him again.

Between the sun and the exhaustion from pushing, he wanted to lie there. But there was something different in the way she called his name. He sat up, waiting for her to come to the side of the road.

"What is it?"

"Where's Chelsea?"

He stood and looked around "She's not with you?"

Marie's voice became panic-stricken. "Why the hell would I ask you where she was if she was with me?" He watched her march toward the opposite side of the road and look back. He stopped himself from running after her. Running would mean there was a *reason* to run.

Once on the road, he saw Marie a few yards away, pacing back and forth across the highway, looking down the other side.

"Chelsea?" Rick yelled.

"Chelsea?" Marie repeated.

Marie turned back to him, wild-eyed.

They both took turns calling out Chelsea's name without a response. Finally, Marie snapped. "Rick! *Where is she?*"

Tears streamed down her face.

"She was here!" Rick screamed. "She was right fucking *here!* Chelsea! Come here right this instant!"

Panic won. Rick ran, rechecking everywhere, his eyes following the path of the hay.

"Did she get back in the car?" Marie asked, hopeful.

The car! Yes, she had to be in the car. He hadn't heard her climb back inside, but then, he'd been exerting himself pushing it out of the ditch. He hadn't heard the door open, that's all. Hadn't heard it close, either. He simply hadn't noticed. And neither had Marie, but she'd been caught up in what they were doing, too.

They both took off in a run. Marie flung open the rear passenger door, screaming, "Chelsea!" Rick watched her lift her hands to her mouth and step back from the car. "Oh my god!"

"What?" He ripped open the opposing door.

"She's not here!"

Rick opened the trunk and dropped to his knees, ignoring the pain that shot up as the hot pavement razed his skin.

She wasn't under the car, either.

"Chelsea Elizabeth Palmer, you come here *right now!*" Marie yelled, fists balled to her sides.

"Chelsea!" Rick took a deep breath and yelled again. "Chelsea!"

He ran back into the middle of the road. No sign of her.

"Rick." The tone of her voice changed again.

"What?" he said and took a step towards her.

"Look."

Rick followed where her fingers pointed, expecting to see Chelsea pop out of the grass, but instead his eyes rested on a telephone pole with birds perched along the wires. Crows. He counted six. Six crows.

"God damn it, Marie!" Rick lashed out, furious.

"Rick...that rhyme..."

He had to slow down before he lost his mind. His gaze shifted from the crows to the grass below. Rick's eyes narrowed as he stepped forward. Behind him he heard her mumbling something, but he ignored it and moved on a little faster. There was a break in the hay-small, but still visible. The edge was distorted, as if something had broken through. After a moment of staring, he comprehended what he was looking at. A hole was in the dried grass.

And he saw something else too.

Rick ran, stumbling down the ditch, and landed on his knees in front of the hay. Marie was immediately behind him. They both stared, not *at* the hole, rather what was in it and all around the hole.

"What's that?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Rick didn't answer. He continued to stare at what he knew was blood.

It's not hers. We're in the country. That blood could belong to anything.

Except they were alone out here, and the blood was fresh.

They moved towards the small entrance. Marie dropped down to her knees beside him. Rick barely noticed. He stared hard into the hole, noticing how it seemed like someone had been dragged into it. *Signs of a struggle*. The words resonated in his head for a moment, and then it all clicked.

Chelsea's in there. If she's bleeding, she's alive.

Rick pushed Marie aside and broke into a run. He parted the tall grass as he took each long, hard step. It was easy to tell where she'd been; the hay grass was trampled, disorderly, unkempt. There was a trail, a path cut through the field, more or less straight on. Worse than anything, he followed a path of blood, left like a trail of breadcrumbs.

He didn't see Chelsea anywhere. He thought about going back for some kind of weapon, but he had already wasted enough time.

Marie gasped from somewhere behind him. She tried to keep up, but he forged on without waiting.

"I'll get her," he said, hoping she would have the wits to turn back and flag someone down.

This can't be happening!

Rick thought clearly enough to know that despite his panic, despite the time he was losing, he needed to move carefully. If he ran too fast, he might lose track of the path. He went on, one long stride in front of the other. Grass brushed at his arms, face, and chest.

A grove of trees a hundred or so yards away caught his attention. He couldn't tell from that far back but figured it was where the trail led. That's where she would go, or whoever—whatever—had her would. It was the only thing out there besides the god damn highway.

Thoughts berated his mind, trying to loop him into a panic. He imagined worst-case scenarios, but he fought past them as he cut through the grass, still following the blood trail. He pushed on, the clearing not far. Tears stung his eyes. He stopped for a second to listen. Marie was stumbling through the trail, crying. Flies buzzed around his ears. Beetles crawled on his shorts and legs.

"One crow...is unlucky," Marie's voice came from behind him. Rick tried to ignore her and started moving a little faster.

He followed the path, each blade of grass splattered by a painter's brush.

Rick wondered how much blood Chelsea had in her. Then he wondered why he would even think such a thing.

"Two crows...lucky." He heard her say. She was on his heels now. He sped up, the clearing not much further.

He tried not to notice her. He tried *hard* to ignore her words.

"Three is...health," she said louder.

Between the blood, heat, and Marie losing her mind, panic won.

“Four is wealth...” her ragged voice screamed.

Running was illogical—he needed to slow down, he needed to think, he needed to conserve his strength. But logic was a thing of the past. Logic did not belong beneath a sun that knew neither joy nor pity. Logic belonged in the air-conditioned safety of the Toyota, while his daughter tried in vain to ignore her parents’ bickering. Logic belonged back on the East Coast, in a house that was coming apart at the seams.

The field opened to a grove of trees, an oasis in the patchwork. Rick stumbled into it, and Marie collapsed on the ground beside him, half in and half out of the grassy hell.

“Five is sickness,” she managed to say.

Marie regained her feet. Her breath was sharp and jagged. Rick saw she was staring towards the trees and followed her gaze to the center of the grove. Her gasps grew shriller until they petered out into half-sobs.

If it weren’t for Marie, he wouldn’t have seen the animal staring at them. It stood several yards away, beside a cluster of small trees grown thick together, its body tense, ready to attack. Rick didn’t know if it was a jackal, wolf, or coyote, but he understood why his wife was hyperventilating. He knew as soon as he saw the canine.

Blood coated its muzzle.

Rick yelled. It was instinctive, primal—no conscious thought, just a buildup of air and a compression of the lungs. It must have been menacing enough, because the beast—a coyote...yes, it had to be a coyote—darted off in the opposite direction. The animal didn’t make a sound as it dodged trees and exposed roots, its tan body disappearing like a shadow in the dark.

Rick and Marie stood still, staring at where the coyote vanished. Images of the dog snatching his daughter from the road flashed through his mind.

He took a step, knowing a pack of coyotes might be watching him from the shadows. Then he took another. And

another. Each one cautious, each one forced by whatever willpower remained in his body.

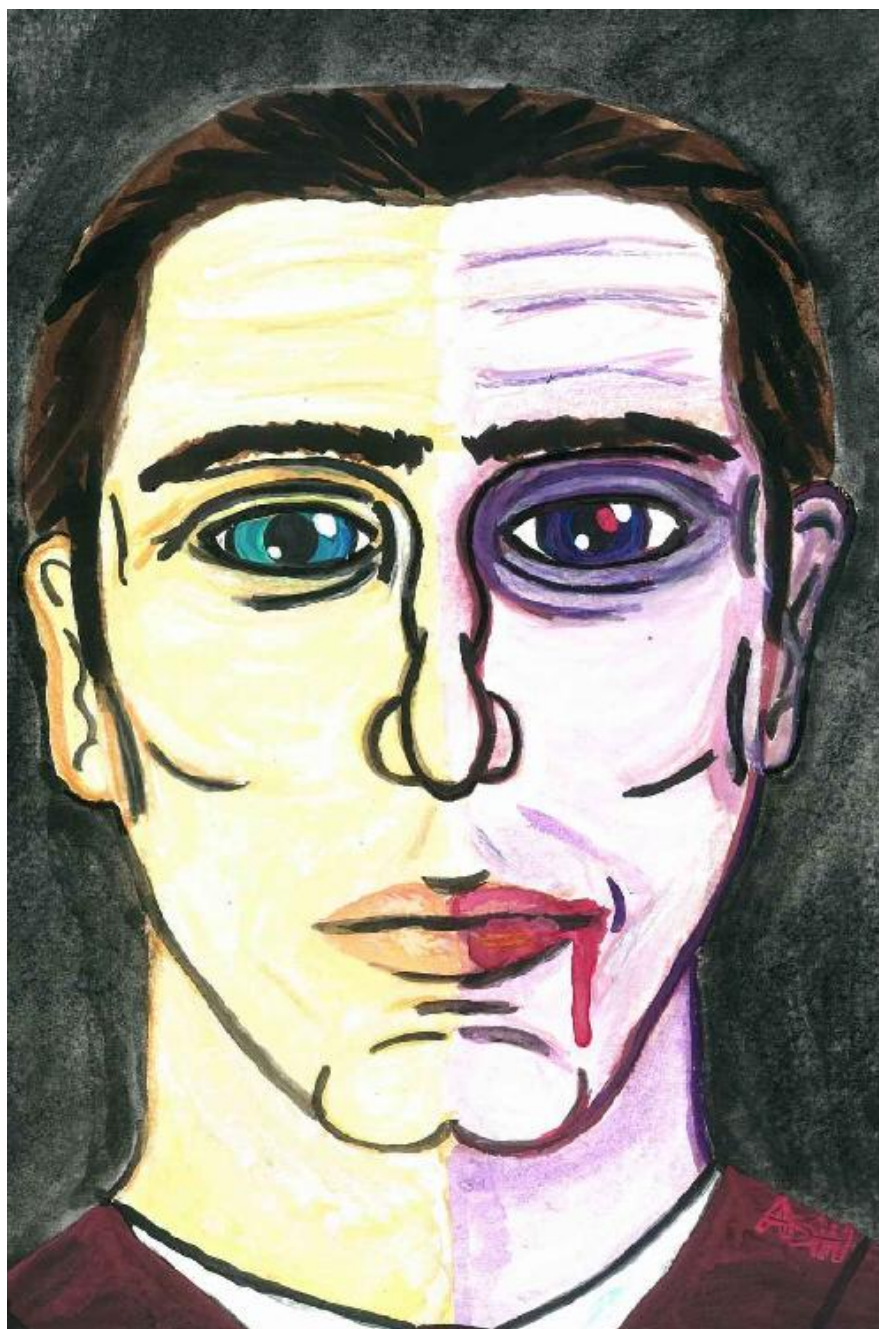
When Marie spoke again, he wanted to turn around and strangle her, to tell her she was a lying bitch, but all he could do was let the immensity of her words sink into his flesh like an anchor: "Six is death."

Rick reached the spot where the coyote had been. He turned so that he could see behind the trees and stared down. Then he crouched carefully and reached out a hand but quickly brought it back by his side.

He stared until tears blurred his vision. He looked away, blinking at a tree a few yards to his right. There, in the top few branches were a bunch of crows, all of them seeming to stare at him with black, accusing eyes.

Rick couldn't help it. He didn't want to, but what he wanted didn't matter anymore. It hadn't mattered since the car had swerved off the highway into the fields that were now his prison.

He counted the crows...and began to scream.



MAN OF THE PEOPLE

DUSTIN GILLESPIE

Crowe sat half-reclined in a mechanical bed with his knees up and a sheet draped between them, like the cables of a suspension bridge. He was old, but not nearly as old as he looked. The sprigs of hair that grew in a circle around the top of his head were short and almost downy. Months ago, when his hair first began to leave him, it had been a steely mixture of salt and pepper. Now, all was an unwashed white with a yellowish tinge. His skin—always a few shades darker than most other people—was pocked with red sores, some of which were healing, others stubbornly refusing to. A thin, rubber tube looped around each ear before meeting at his nostrils.

Dr. Ravin—a tall Indian man—strolled in with a dour look across his usually genial face. “Mr. Crowe,” he said with perfect, measured enunciation. “There are some things we need to discuss.”

The flat screen TV, bolted to the wall overhead, displayed the second presidential debate, or maybe it was the third. Crowe didn’t really care, but it was the only thing on. The opponents stood across from each other, both clean-cut, both certainly assholes of the highest caliber.

So it was before me, so it will be after me, Crowe thought.

“Mr. Crowe,” Dr. Ravin repeated. “I’ve got the results back from the tests...”

Crowe wrapped a skeletal hand around the remote and raised it. It was a bulky, clumsy thing, attached to a cord connected to the bed. His bony thumb searched for the

volume, and he stared straight at the doctor as he notched it up as high as it would go. Then, he turned his eyes back to the screen as if the doctor had never been there. Without hesitation, Dr. Ravin reached up and unplugged the television.

"I'm watching that," Crowe said with a voice like sandpaper. Without warning, he coughed in deep, painful bursts. Globbs of blood flew into his mouth. He snatched a cup from the bedside table and spat into it. When he looked at his doctor, he still felt a small string of bloody saliva clinging to his chin.

"I'm afraid there is bad news."

"No shit?" Crowe said sarcastically. "The Red Sox lose?"

"Mr. Crowe, there is no easy way to say this, so I will not draw it out. We are out of options. The treatments did not work at all, and the cancer has spread to your other lung. It is moving fast...very fast."

"So, what's next?" The bite from his words was gone now. The doctor seemed to relax at the sound of his tired voice.

"Well, the conversation is no longer about treatment." Ravin's voice remained calm. "The conversation is now about time and comfort. There are a lot of options for—"

"Alright doc, let's cut the bullshit. How long?"

Dr. Ravin sighed. "Months, maybe less, but there are ways to improve your comf—"

"Oh, fuck off. You know damn well there won't be anything comfortable about this, so just do me a favor and fuck off."

"Can I call someone?"

"Call a cab for yourself. Go back to Pakistan or Iraq. Go fuck a camel on a magic carpet for all I care. Just leave me alone."

The doctor stared at his patient for a few seconds and let out another sigh. He walked out of the room. Crowe focused his attention back on the television for a good long time, until the urge for a cigarette grew to be unbearable.

The nurse caught him at the elevator dragging his IV with one hand and clutching a pack of smokes in the other. Naturally, she objected.

“What exactly do you think is going to happen?” He stared at her with his icy blue eyes until the firm hand on his elbow pulled away.

Outside, he lit up and drew in the warmth of the cigarette. It burned wonderfully, and at once, he fell into a fit of coughing so fierce that he didn’t know if it would ever stop. A young couple strolled by holding hands and smiling. The wife cupped the underside of her pregnant belly. When they saw Crowe, their smiles vanished, and they immediately crossed to the opposite sidewalk.

“You’ve always had that effect on people,” a voice said over his shoulder. “Though, that’s probably truer now than it was a few months ago.”

Crowe turned and saw a familiar but unwelcome face moving towards him.

“Oh hell, Haynes. What do you want? Come to watch me die?”

“Nice to see you, too, Crowe.” Vincent Haynes replied. His jet black hair lay sharply to one side. He looked as if he had just walked out of a men’s catalog, grinning with an air of confidence.

“I see that your situation hasn’t dampened your enthusiasm for bad habits.”

“Is that how you sound when you talk to your wife?” Crowe pulled in another drag. “Honestly, I can hear you in the bedroom saying, ‘Well tonight, I’m feeling rather randy, my dear. Mayhaps you can fish my dick from my trousers for a good old fashioned rooting.’”

Haynes smiled, a careless thing without a hint of offense. “You’re trying to get a rise out of me. You’ve always done that. I suppose dying shouldn’t change anything. To answer your earlier question, no, I haven’t come to watch you die, at least, not exactly.”

After flicking the cigarette at Haynes' very expensive-looking shoes, Crowe turned and headed back inside.

"We're not done here."

"Actually, we are. The days of you telling me what to do are long gone."

"I'm here to offer you a job."

Crowe stopped. The light had nearly left the sky, so when he turned back, his eyes rested on Haynes' silhouette. "You fucking with me?"

"I assure you I'm not."

Crowe lowered his head. "Why do I get the distinct feeling you're pulling my dick for the way I treated you all these years?" he asked. "You got dozens of agents. No one needs an old timer with only a few weeks left on his time card."

"Actually," Haynes said slowly, "that's precisely why we need you.

Your situation makes you the perfect candidate." He paused for a moment before adding, "The only candidate."

They stood in silence. When Crowe began speaking, Haynes cut him off. "There are hundreds of reasons not to do this, and I understand if you want to spend your remaining time in a more suitable manner. The truth is," he sighed as if the words inflicted physical pain, "we *need* you. This is the biggest job any of us has ever been involved in, and we've only got one chance to get it right."

Crowe lit another cigarette but barely took a drag before the full body coughing overtook him. The violent heaving nearly brought him to his knees, and when he looked up, Haynes had taken several steps back.

"Don't worry, Haynes," he said, wiping the blood from his chin. "I won't get any lung on your shiny shoes."

Crowe pulled himself slowly to his feet and leaned back, struggling for air. "Fuck this hospital, fuck cancer, and fuck you. I said I was out." He turned back towards the hospital.

"There's a package waiting at your house," Haynes called after him. "I suggest you take a look."

“Eat a plate of shit!” Crowe yelled over his shoulder. “And stay away from my fucking funeral!”

The nurse came in as he pulled his now loose jeans over his skinny backside. The alarms in the room were blipping uncontrollably as a pile of cords lay uselessly upon the bed.

“Mr. Crowe, you need to let us know if you want to leave the room.”

“As much as I’ve enjoyed my stay, I’m afraid it’s time for me to go.”

“Mr. Crowe, you’re in no condition to—”

“Live. Yeah, I heard as much.”

He continued dressing as she tried to change his mind, but it was wasted air. Things were the way they were, and although he appreciated her concern, there wasn’t a thing on earth that would keep him in that room for another minute.

The doctor sent him home with a portable oxygen generator—a bulky, cylindrical gadget that pulled extra oxygen from the air. He realized in the car that it wasn’t nearly the same as the real stuff—straight from the tap at the hospital—but it would have to do.

By the time he made it to the kitchen, he collapsed into the first chair he stumbled across.

He spotted the box sitting atop his kitchen table. There were no labels, no markings...nothing but cardboard and tape. *The sons of bitches broke in*, he thought. He briefly considered tossing it onto the floor and stomping it to pieces. The truth was he couldn’t. No matter how long he held out or how hard he fought, he wouldn’t be able to die in peace until he knew what was inside.

Crowe drew a small folding knife from his pocket and sliced into the top. After brushing aside some crumpled newspaper, he found a gun. It was a very short double barreled shotgun, the type mobsters called a Lupara. The

entire length was fifteen inches long. He thumbed the action and the barrels cracked open to reveal empty chambers. Crowe closed the barrels with a flick of his wrist, and the metallic crack echoed around the empty apartment.

Crowe dug a little deeper. He pulled out two shotgun shells, both smooth and jet black. Upon inspecting one of the copper rims, he noticed a single letter pressed into the metal: V.

Crowe sneered and coughed again. Setting down the two shells, he dug for the others that surely must be there. It wasn't until the newspaper circled his feet in crumpled heaps that he realized that two was all there was.

"The hell?"

Only a large plastic envelope remained. He already knew what was inside and fetched a black light. It was one of several such lamps placed throughout the house.

Crowe tore open the top of the envelope and slowly pulled the picture out. As always, the front showed the target, the back showed vital information such as name and address. To his surprise the back sat totally blank.

"What the *hell*?"

After turning the picture over in his hand, his mouth dropped. Crowe was many things but not easily shocked. He had seen more in his years than most men, but nothing could have prepared him for that. The picture showed a man in a sharply tailored suit flanked on either side by equally dressed men of various age and race. Without a second thought, he turned on the UV lamp and held it over the photograph. The man in the center of the picture began to glow an unearthly blue.

"No fucking way."

Vincent Haynes hung onto the edge of his heated pool. As part of his morning ritual he spent thirty minutes in the balmy water, every day of the year, weather permitting. The

sun had only been up for about fifteen minutes, and steam still rose from the blue surface, twisting in casual loops that disappeared into the cool morning air.

"Vincent, I'm heading out to work."

"Alright. Lunch?" Haynes asked his wife.

There was a shuffling and giggling inside the house as his wife gathered her purse and their daughter.

"Uhhh, I don't think so. I'm still pretty slammed. Tomorrow maybe?"

"Yeah, that will work. Love you guys."

"We love you, too."

Haynes stepped out of the pool and began to dry off. A sudden chill ran up his back at the unmistakable cold of a gun.

"I didn't hear you come in," Haynes said, wrapping a towel around his waist.

"They never do," Crowe hissed in his ear. "What the fuck is this?"

Haynes turned and stared at the picture shoved into his hand. "Why do you still have this?" he said with a sudden sharpness. "You know protocol—"

"Fuck protocol, and fuck you!" Crowe pressed the barrel to Haynes' forehead.

"You and the agency getting one more in before I croak? Is that what this is?"

Haynes smacked the gun aside. "You plan on shooting me?"

"You think I won't? You honestly think I have anything to lose?"

All at once, Crowe began to hack and wheeze, and the gun dropped uselessly to the concrete.

"Neither of us has time for this," Haynes said.

The coughing faded, and Crowe looked up, sneering at his former employer with true hatred.

"Did you UV the picture?"

"Of course I did," Crowe replied. "You faked it."

“Why exactly would I do something like that? You think I really have time to mess with you? You were important to the agency but not that important.”

Crowe flipped on the oxygen compressor, slung over his shoulder, and then fixed the tube into his nostrils.

“It’s a fake,” he said, breathing deeply. “It has to be. What’s on that picture is impossible.”

“No, not impossible. A highly unlikely worst case scenario, but not impossible.”

Crowe picked up the gun and flipped it open, staring at the V on the back of the shells. “V-Load,” he said as he drew one of the shells out. “I know you were more of a desk jockey, but even you must know what’s in here.”

Haynes took the shell and held it out between two fingers. “A dozen wooden flechettes, about an inch and a half long, and each one soaked in garlic oil. Once they’re packed, you fill in the rest of the shell with silver shavings. Effective kill range of about ten feet, but one of these can seriously injure a target up to thirty feet-the perfect round to kill a vampire.”

“That’s exactly why I designed it. And now you’re telling me to use it on him...on one of the two men running for president?”

Haynes sighed. “That’s what I’m telling you.”

“How the hell did all this happen? I’ve been killing monsters for the government for over forty years, and I’ve never seen anything like this.” Crowe said, sitting at Haynes’ dining room table.

Haynes stood at the bar and poured a double scotch for each of them.

“I know it’s a little early for booze,” he said as he swirled the dark liquor in the glass.

“I’ll be dead in weeks,” Crowe croaked. “Early don’t mean much anymore.” The picture sat on the table in front of him,

and he studied it intently. "I still can't imagine how this could happen."

Haynes sat down across from him and sipped his drink, grimacing as he did. "I've been following this for a few years now, and there are days that I don't believe it. The agency has been tracking this whole situation very closely. Trust me when I tell you that you're not the only agent involved."

"If you were on it, how did it get this far?"

"I'll get there, but it goes back a lot further than you might think. Do you remember a target named Phillip Knox?"

Crowe rubbed his bristled chin for a moment. "A doctor, right?"

"That's the one."

"Jesus, that was probably fifteen years ago," Crowe said.

"More like twenty. We had a lot of intel on him back then, but we never knew the full story. Based on medical records, Knox was supposed to die around '85. Cancer, like you. It was bad enough for him to go ahead and make final arrangements. Lucky for him, he had a sudden turnaround."

"Miracle drug?" Crowe asked sarcastically.

"You could say that. Someone turned him, but all signs point to it being a mutual arrangement. We still don't know who it was, but they wanted something from him. They wanted a doctor with very specific interests."

"Such as?"

"Eugenics. Knox wrote half a dozen articles for medical journals on the subject. Some of it is really controversial stuff, borderline shit that can give people bad ideas."

"Like Hitler?" Crowe mused.

"Maybe worse, like a vampire with deep pockets. Regardless of who turned him, he began to work exclusively for a company called Horizon Enterprises around 1989. There, he focused on R and D, the public details of which I won't bore you with. What I can tell you is how they caught the agency's attention. They were based out of San Francisco, a city with a high homeless population that began

to mysteriously drop in the early 90's. Talking heads will prattle on about social systems and safety nets, but we knew better. Someone was taking them off the streets, and once we started looking, it didn't take long to trace it back to the good doctor."

"We?" Crowe asked with a bit of uncharacteristic good humor in his voice. "Were you even alive then?"

"Not that it matters, but I had just started with the agency around the time you took care of Knox." He glared at Crowe and added, "Pardon me for not being as tenured."

"Oh, unwind your panties and keep talking."

"There was enough research done into Horizon to realize that it wasn't just a cover. There were people working there, a lot of them who probably had no clue what happened after hours, especially at the upper echelons. It was decided that taking Knox out would be enough to put the brakes on whatever was being planned, and for a while, it did just that."

"Did you ever actually see any research?"

"Not until much, much later."

"Did you have any idea what he was up to?"

"No, but we knew it was related to eugenics. There were some notes that hinted at some kind of long running vampire breeding plan, but they weren't complete. At the time, no one was able to put the pieces together. Until three years ago, that is."

Crowe cleared his throat and then drained the rest of his glass. "Can I smoke?"

"Is that wise?" Haynes asked.

"Not really," he said as he lit up. "What happened three years ago?"

"An agent killed a vampire moving a shipment of blood up from Mexico, and he found GPS coordinates to a place in West Virginia, only there was nothing for a ten mile radius at that location. Turned out to be the start of a dirt road that led to a very remote facility. I'm talking off the grid

completely. The outer structure was painted green to match the forest, and the majority of the floor plan was buried underground."

"They really didn't want to be found."

"No shit. We sent a crew in and raided it, and it took months to sort through the research there. It turns out that killing Knox barely put a dent in the program, but we could finally see the entire scope of things. He had identified over thirty hereditary variables specific to vampires, everything from eye color, strength, allergies, and one very important piece of the puzzle: aversion to sunlight."

"I'll be damned."

"Before you killed him, he had discovered that certain vampires could withstand exposure to the sun for longer periods than others. And after twenty years of infecting, breeding, and even genetic manipulation, the Horizon Group had finally created their masterpiece."

"A vampire that is immune to sunlight. Fuck me."

"Well said." Haynes refilled their glasses.

"They could make an army and take over. That seems to be what they've always wanted."

"You're right, but we caught wind of everything before it got that bad. What we stumbled upon in West Virginia was still phase one. At that point, there were only three of them, all born from a single vector-a mother." He shuddered as he said the last part.

"Mother?"

"All of those years of breeding and testing came down to a single focal point, an absolute abomination." Haynes paused and took another sip from his drink. "I was there. After they cleared out the fodder, they found...it. No one knew what to do. They wanted a 'desk jockey' to make the final call, so they picked me."

Haynes drank down what was left in his glass and set it down on the table.

“Even now, it’s hard to say what it was originally. They kept it in a cage, sort of hunched over like a dog. It was hairless, toothless, and eyeless. Didn’t even have holes for ears. I don’t even think it was actually conscious, at least not exactly. It flinched if you hit the cage, and it would lap up anything that fell on the floor, but that was it. There were tubes coming out from around its spine, removing fluids, raw genetic material. These were used to create the serum. When injected into a human, they would turn into a vampire like no other. Based on the notes, they tested it on dozens of candidates before they got it right, and the effects were disastrous. Eventually they cracked it, and when they did, they knew it was precious, and damn hard to recreate. They had to choose the right candidate for the change. I wonder now if maybe they knew how close we were to finding them.”

“What happened to the mother?” Crowe asked.

“V-load. Decapitation. Gasoline. Every single shred of DNA had to be destroyed, and I made sure it was.”

Crowe pointed to the picture. “If he’s one, who are the other two?”

“Both were test subjects that worked at the facility—a first test and a backup.

Both were killed and ID’d after we went in. They knew the little serum that remained was more precious than anything that any of them had ever done, so they made sure it went to the right person. A rising star who had already been using his clout to further their causes, a man who wanted to be a vampire, and to hold the highest office. He’s the only one left.”

“Are you sure?” Crowe asked, his voice rising as he finally understood the enormity of the situation. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“We confirmed everything. The Horizon Group is dead. All the loose ends have been tied and retied. The only thing left is him.”

Crowe leaned back and took another sip before tipping his cigarette into his glass. He coughed once and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"It's just one guy. What can he really do?"

Haynes sighed. "We don't know, and that's what scares the shit out of us. Maybe he can't do anything. Like most presidents, he might be too tied up in war and politics to do a thing. But imagine the possibilities. Despite everything we do, the vampire underground is stronger than ever. What if he becomes the first president to start legalizing all the drugs we supposedly fight against? The agency dwindles and they start to take over. What if he opens the borders to more traffic from Mexico? All of a sudden, we would be overwhelmed. But most importantly, what if his DNA is the key to restarting Horizon? That's what really scares me—an army of vampires walking around in the sun."

Crowe thought long about this and said, "Alright. I get it. But why me?"

Haynes leaned back and struggled with his words. "What do you want me to say? That you're one of the best? That you're the right man for the job? That you're the only one that can get it done? All of those things might be true. But I think you know the real reason it has to be you."

Crowe's best sarcastic smile rose around the edges of his mouth. "Because it's a one way trip."

Haynes nodded solemnly. "I've tried to pull strings with the Secret Service to find a good time to make a hit, but it's too far gone for that. If we reach any farther we'll expose the agency, and we can't do that, not even for this mission. If it happens, it has to happen without any extra intervention on our part."

"So you're asking me to commit suicide?"

"No, I'm asking you to do what's right."

Crowe stood and turned towards the window. The sun shined on the perfectly manicured lawn, and he couldn't

help but think about his own apartment—so shabby, so simple, so much less.

“You know what they gave me for my retirement? After 35 years and a case of lung cancer, I got a gold pocket watch. It’s a nice one, too.” He turned back to Haynes. “I fought these monsters for the better part of my life, and all I have to show for it is a watch that cost about the same as your television set. What the fuck do I care about what’s right?”

“Crowe, please...”

“You know what will happen if I do this? Every person I’ve ever known, including my daughter who wants nothing to do with me, will think I was sick. Not just an asshole, but an asshole with a diseased mind. The cops will raid my house and find all my weapons, guns and knives, all the tools of the trade. The tools of your trade, I should say. And they’ll all go, ‘I knew something wasn’t right about him. He just kept to himself a little too much. He was probably some kind of pervert, too.’”

“No, that won’t happen.”

“Oh, but it will. For months, they’ll show my picture on every screen they can fit it on, so the world can see the monster. The fucking monster! And then, they’ll go on to proclaim the real monster a hero, a martyr, a beacon of hope for all of us, and for years he will be spoken of with reverence and pride, a true paragon. I won’t even be the shit on the bottom of his shoe. Does that sound just about *right* to you?”

Haynes said nothing.

“It’s fucked up,” Crowe said plainly, “And I wouldn’t mind punching you in the mouth, but that don’t mean I won’t do it.”

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“I didn’t propose, you dandy little bastard, and I didn’t say I *would* do it, either. I want to hear the plan, first.”

“I guess there’s no point in arguing,” Haynes said as he stared into Crowe’s old stony face. “I meant what I said

earlier when I told you we don't have much time. There's really only one shot. He'll be in Atlanta in three days for a town hall meeting. Usual fluff shit, mainly just his supporters around to sing his praises while the press take pictures. We've got the flight, hotel, and rental car already prepared for you."

"How's security?"

"For general public, not too bad, but if you want to get close, it will be stiff. That's where you'll have to improvise."

Crowe stood up and slung the oxygen compressor over his shoulder. "Send me the stuff."

"So you're in?"

Crowe stopped at the door. "Dunno. Watch the news, and if I were you, I'd work on a contingency plan."

Crowe spent the rest of that day drinking. Around three o'clock, someone knocked, but by the time he stumbled to the door, he only found an envelope that had been shoved underneath. The night moved on in a drunken spin. Empty beer cans littered his apartment floor like fallen leaves. Shortly after midnight, he passed out with a revolver clasped tightly in his right hand, the hammer cocked.

The idea had been to get drunk one last time, but the results left something to be desired. Crowe woke gasping for breath, sure he had broken some ribs at some point. He rolled onto his back and gulped at the open air, an invisible weight lying on his chest. The feeling didn't leave him until he pulled himself clumsily into his recliner and turned on his oxygen. It was the closest he had ever come to dying, and the feeling shocked him deeper than he could have imagined. He rested in the chair until almost noon. By then, his breathing had normalized.

"What a pissy life this is," he said as he finally groped his way into the kitchen. "Good thing I'm dying." He laughed as he fished a slice of cold pizza from the fridge.

By six o'clock that night, Crowe had been staring at the phone for nearly two hours.

"She'll be home by now," he said. "I know that much. She'll be home, but he won't be yet, so now's the time. If I'm going to do it, now's the time."

He lifted the phone and stared at it, something he had done half a dozen times by now. *Don't set it down again. Don't you fucking do it.* Crowe forced his fingers through the numbers as fast as he could. The droning ring sent a chill down his back.

"Hello," a man's voice answered.

"Mark," Crowe replied in the most amiable voice he could muster.

"Yes? Who's this?"

"It's...it's Mr. Crowe." There was a long, empty pause. "Your father-in-law."

"Oh. Look, Elizabeth isn't here." There was a shuffling on the line followed by the muted sound of voices too faint to make out. "She's working late tonight. I can tell her you called--"

"Put my daughter on."

"I told you, she's not here."

"And I told you to put her on the fucking phone. I'm not playing with you, you faggoty little bastard. I swear to God if I have to drive down there, I will fuck you until your--"

"Dad!"

It was the first time in three years that Crowe had heard his daughter's voice, and his eyes immediately stung.

"Liz," he said with a shaky voice. "I, uh...hi."

"Dad, I thought we agreed you wouldn't do this anymore." Her voice was stern.

"I know. It's just that. Well, there's some things going on with me, and I needed to let you know."

"There's nothing you can say now that can make up for the things you said when Mark and I got married."

"I don't expect you to change your mind, Liz. I just need to tell you something."

“No one calls me Liz anymore. No one has called me that in ten years.”

Crowe paused for a long time. “You’re still Liz to me.”

Her answer was sudden, direct, without a moment of hesitation: “I don’t want to hear from you anymore. Not now, not ever.”

The phone went dead, and he sat in the fading sunlight spilling in through the bedroom window, feeling more empty and older than he ever had. When the sun was gone, he found a forgotten fifth of bourbon in the back of a kitchen cabinet. The bottle was half full, and he belted it down within minutes.

At some point in the night, Crowe found himself behind the wheel. It played like a VHS tape that had started in the middle. He couldn’t for the life of him remember getting in the car or turning out onto the highway. *I could’ve been killed*, he thought to himself, and the idea made him double over with laughter.

Crowe knew exactly where he was headed, and there was only one reason for going there. He stopped the first hooker he crossed, something he never did in the past. But now, diseases didn’t seem too pressing of an issue. She stepped into his truck, and they drove.

“Whatcha looking for?” she asked.

“You got a menu?” he replied, laughing.

They passed under a street light as he glanced over at her, seeing a glimpse of her for the first time. To his amazement, she was smiling, a toothy, decaying smile.

“You a case, ain’t you?” she replied with good humor.

“That I am, sweetheart.”

“I know a place up here,” she said, motioning to an empty, darkened lot.

Once in the parking lot, she turned to him. “So, let’s talk business.” She quoted the services and prices, ticking them off with her fingers.

Crowe leaned back and smiled. "Hmm," he said with a smirk, "I might just have to go with a sampler platter." He reached into the glove box for a roll of cash.

"Money is no object my bawdy lass."

A sudden splash of moonlight hit her face, and Crowe fell silent. Without any real warning, he was thrown backward-back through the pain and the years and the soul-crushing regret. All at once, it wasn't a stringy-haired hooker in the passenger seat next to him. It was his wife. Maybe it was the way the moon hit her face, or maybe it was the faint scent that hung on her, the subtle smell of perfume or deodorant, a scent that was achingly familiar. Or maybe he was just a dying old man whose mind refused to be trusted. The reasons didn't matter.

"Here," he said, handing her money.

She thumbed through the stack, and when she realized they were all hundreds, her eyes cut back to him defensively.

"Now, I don't do no crazy shit...I got kids...please don't make me do no crazy shit."

"Just get out," he said.

Her eyes grew large, and tears welled at the edges of them. "Don't kill me. Please, don't fucking kill me."

Crowe reached across her and opened the door. "I'm certainly a piece of shit, lady, just not that kind."

As the prostitute fled into the night, Crowe drove away slowly, stopping just once at the liquor store.

The next morning, Crowe's pillow was dark brown from blood. He stared at it, wondering how much he'd lost, and when he stumbled into the bathroom, he wasn't surprised to see the sallow, sunken shade of his skin. He looked dead already, and the way things were going, he *would be* by the end of the week. There was nothing left for him, not that there had been much to begin with.

It took a few hours to gather his supplies and load his trunk with his tools.

By nightfall, he was in Atlanta.

When Crowe checked into a hotel, he sent a suit out to be cleaned with the guarantee that it would be ready first thing in the morning. He hated wearing suits, but this one was sharp. It was a single breasted navy blue job that made him look as respectable as any other man at the town hall.

Crowe spent most of the night in his hotel room with his tools spread out on the table. He brought a bag packed to the brim with everything he could possibly need, and he immediately set to work. For years he had been good with his hands, and even though they shook harder than ever, they refused to let him down. The only break he allowed himself was long enough to order a steak, the biggest one that room service could bring.

In the early hours of the morning, when the work was done, Crowe wondered whether or not the thing he built would get the job done.

"Either way," he said to himself. "Either way."

Crowe checked his reflection in the mirror. He barely recognized himself. His face was clean shaven for the first time in a month, and though his suit was as sharp as ever, it clung to his old bones like they were draped over a coat rack.

It was the thinnest he had ever been.

The last thing he did was pull out a notepad, removed a square of the white paper, and sat down on the edge of the bed. It didn't take long to write what he wanted to say.

"Let's do it," he said as he slung the oxygen tank over his shoulder.

After tipping the cab driver a hundred, he stepped out at the convention center. "Damn buddy," the driver said. "Thanks. I hope you get to feeling better."

Crowe laughed. "You know something? Dying is one hell of a motherfucker."

The walk up to the center almost did him in. He was forced to stop on the long flight of concrete stairs to fit the oxygen tubes into his nostrils. The crowd parted around Crowe. Some glanced, feigning concern, but no one tried to stop him as he made his way through the sea of people.

Once he made it into the center, Crowe truly believed he would keel over then and there. With each new breath, his lungs expanded a little less. It felt as if his shirt grew tighter by the second. He leaned against a wall, coughing and wheezing, completely unable to catch his breath. Finally, one of the staff spied him and approached cautiously.

“Sir, are you alright?”

Crowe dug deep and spoke. “No sir, I’m not alright.” He took a deep breath and tapped into his few remaining reserves of charm and hoped it would be enough. “And I won’t be alright until I know our country is headed in the right direction. I’m sick, awful sick. But I’ve come to see the man that could save the country I love while it’s still worth saving. And if I get the chance to shake his hand, well, sir, I think I could die happy.”

The growing smile on the young volunteer’s face told Crowe that even at death’s door, he still had it.

The volunteer led him into a queue of people all passing through a strenuous security check. After a short wait, Crowe was asked some personal information which an attractive young girl entered into a laptop. There was a short pause as the computer ran his information, then she gave a quick smile and allowed him to proceed. In the past, before computers became quite so ubiquitous, he would have been worried. But not anymore. The agency wasn’t good for much, but you could count on them to cover the fake IDs.

“Thanks for coming, Mr. Jacobson. It will take a minute to get through security, but after that we’ll have a seat for you near the front.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Crowe smiled kindly.

That's right, he thought. Just another old grandpa here. Nothing to worry about.

He counted a dozen security men, all in dark suits and wearing sunglasses, except for a dark haired young man holding a wand.

As Crowe walked through the gate, the alarm began beeping.

"Oh my," he said. "I suppose it must be my belt."

"Raise your arms," the guard said.

Crowe did as instructed. The guard swept the wand up and down. He settled briefly on the oxygen condenser before lowering the wand, apparently satisfied.

Each breath was so shallow that Crowe was seeing black blotches in front of his eyes before he sat down in his assigned seat. It was the front row, just off center of the action. As he eased down, his vision began to clear.

"Sir, are you okay?"

He nodded at the boy. "Fine. Just need to catch my breath."

Crowe leaned on his elbow and focused on breathing until a spasm of coughing assaulted his momentary calm. The handkerchief he kept in his pocket was soaked with blood by the time it stopped, but he quickly stuffed it away.

A sudden blur of movement and deafening applause added to the overwhelming confusion Crowe felt. Then excited voices coming through the speakers blended with cheers from places unseen.

"Here he is...our next President of the United States...a true man of the people..."

There were splashes of color that darted in and out of the gray arena, and a voice, louder than the others, rose above the din.

Crowe tried to keep his focus but so much was happening at once. He let himself fade into his memories. "Liz," he muttered.

Something black stirred around the rafters, and occasionally, a smoky tendril stretched down and brushed across the audience like a hand drawn across the tops of a wheat field. Crowe rubbed his eyes, and it was gone.

Suddenly, there was a hand on his shoulder. He was being lifted up, helped to his feet, and even in that stupor, he managed a smile.

"Do you want to talk?" the usher asked. Crowe's eyes focused, just long enough to see the same young man that greeted him at the front door. "I think we would all love to hear from you."

Crowe had never been more confused in his life, but then a euphoric moment of lucidity washed over him. The sights and sounds melted away, and there was only him and the job. In thirty-five years, he had not missed a target.

He stood up as straight as his aching insides would allow. The usher led him down a few stairs to the empty microphone waiting at the bottom. A woman in her fifties had just finished asking a question, and the candidate was just now wrapping up with his winding answer.

"You'll be next," a man told Crowe. "Just step up to the mic and share your thoughts. It will be positive, right?"

Crowe flashed his slyest smile. "Absolutely."

The crowds clapped. Thousands of faces turned towards him and everything fell silent.

This is it, Crowe thought.

"Did you have a question, sir?" the candidate, the enemy, the catalyst that could change the world, asked him.

"No," Crowe said, suddenly aware of how weak his voice sounded. "Not a question. Just a statement if you'd listen."

"Of course, I'll always listen to the American people."

"I knew you would." Crowe took a deep breath and tugged uneasily at the tube in his nose. "I've been a public servant for thirty-five years. I've worked hard almost every day of my life, and I've sacrificed a lot to do my job well. It was a

job that a lot of people wouldn't have wanted to do, but I tried not to complain too much."

He took a breath, then continued. "Now, I'm sick. I don't have much more time. Here at the end, I can't help but wonder what all that work was for. I've always thought that we got out what we put in, that the world we fought for was the world we found waiting for us." He stopped to breathe once more.

"But that promise didn't come true, not for me at least. I'm at the end, and I don't have much of anything."

He scanned the room for a moment, realizing he didn't have much else to say but knowing that his work wasn't done, not just yet.

"But, I have to say one thing. Before I die, I want to know that the America I grew up believing in will be in good hands. I want it to be like it was, and I know you're the man to get us there. I don't have much left to believe in, but I can honestly say that I believe in you!"

The crowd erupted, and the candidate nodded his head, smiling all the while. When the applause died, he followed up with a mini-speech of his own, thanking Crowe for his contribution and assuring him that his work and hope would not be in vain. The usher took Crowe's shoulder once more and led him back to his seat.

"That was amazing," the young man whispered in his ear. "I bet you make the national news!"

"I'd put money on it," Crowe snorted.

The people around him were still clapping, still bobbing their nods of approval as he took his seat among them. A hand gently settled on his shoulder, and he glanced back to see a white-haired man leaning in close to him.

"Jesus is with you brother," the man said.

Crowe stared from the hand up to the man's eyes. "Get that hand off of me before I shove it up your ass."

The hand slowly slid away.

Time passed. Crowe faded in and out, hardly there. Then, he was on his feet, pushed forward by the throng, urged up to the edge of the crowd. The candidate was passing by the aisle, shaking hands, smiling for cameras. Crowe tottered, barely standing...barely breathing...barely living. The world was a tapestry of voices and faces, most unfamiliar, but some long lost...long dead...long gone.

Still he was urged forward, closer and closer, until he was next in line, so close to the candidate that he could smell his aftershave.

A hand thrust towards him, as welcoming and warm as any old friend. Crowe looked from it to the beaming face of the candidate, no doubt pondering the mileage the picture could generate. Crowe had slaughtered hundreds of the beasts before, but never had he shaken hands with one.

He slapped his hand into the candidate's and shook firmly. Then, he pulled him close, so close his mouth was inches away from his ear. The million dollar smile never faded, and they looked like two old buddies sharing a joke.

The oxygen condenser lodged in between the two of them, and the top pressed into the candidate's chest. Crowe slipped aside the false bottom from the casing he had hollowed out the night before.

He drew his target closer with his right hand. With his left hand, he had found the handle of the double barrel resting inside the tank. He pressed it up towards the top of the condenser.

"You know what's funny?" he asked the creature in front of him. "There are assholes in this world who actually think their lives make a difference."

The candidate pulled back, his smile fading as the two men parted. Crowe tilted the condenser down towards the vampire's heart.

"Can you believe that?" he asked, grinning, as he pulled both triggers.

The back of the candidate's immaculate suit exploded into confetti, and blood splattered onto everyone within a ten foot radius. Splintered wood and shaved pieces of silver shredded the vampire's heart, and the candidate was dead before he hit the ground.

Secret Service agents were on Crowe, but none of them opened fire like he thought they would. Instead, they dove on him, pinning him on the ground. He felt knees all over his back, elbows, and across his neck. Rather than fight, Crowe simply closed his eyes.

Let's get this over with, he thought.

In normal cases, there might have been questions of police brutality. Crowe's, however, was no normal case, and there was little doubt that the severity of his cancer had contributed greatly to his death by asphyxiation under half a dozen Secret Service agents. Even without the cancer, no one would have shed a tear for him.

Crowe became the kind of freak that the world couldn't get enough of, a man that hated God and country, a total anarchist whose story could only end in such a brutal way.

Anyone close to him was hounded by the media for months after the assassination. The candidate became a firebrand for the country, a symbol of true patriotism. Bridges between the two parties were mended as every elected representative united in hatred of the man named Crowe. In the end, every detail of that sad slice of American history was accounted for, catalogued, and drawn out to its absolute extreme. Every detail, except for one.

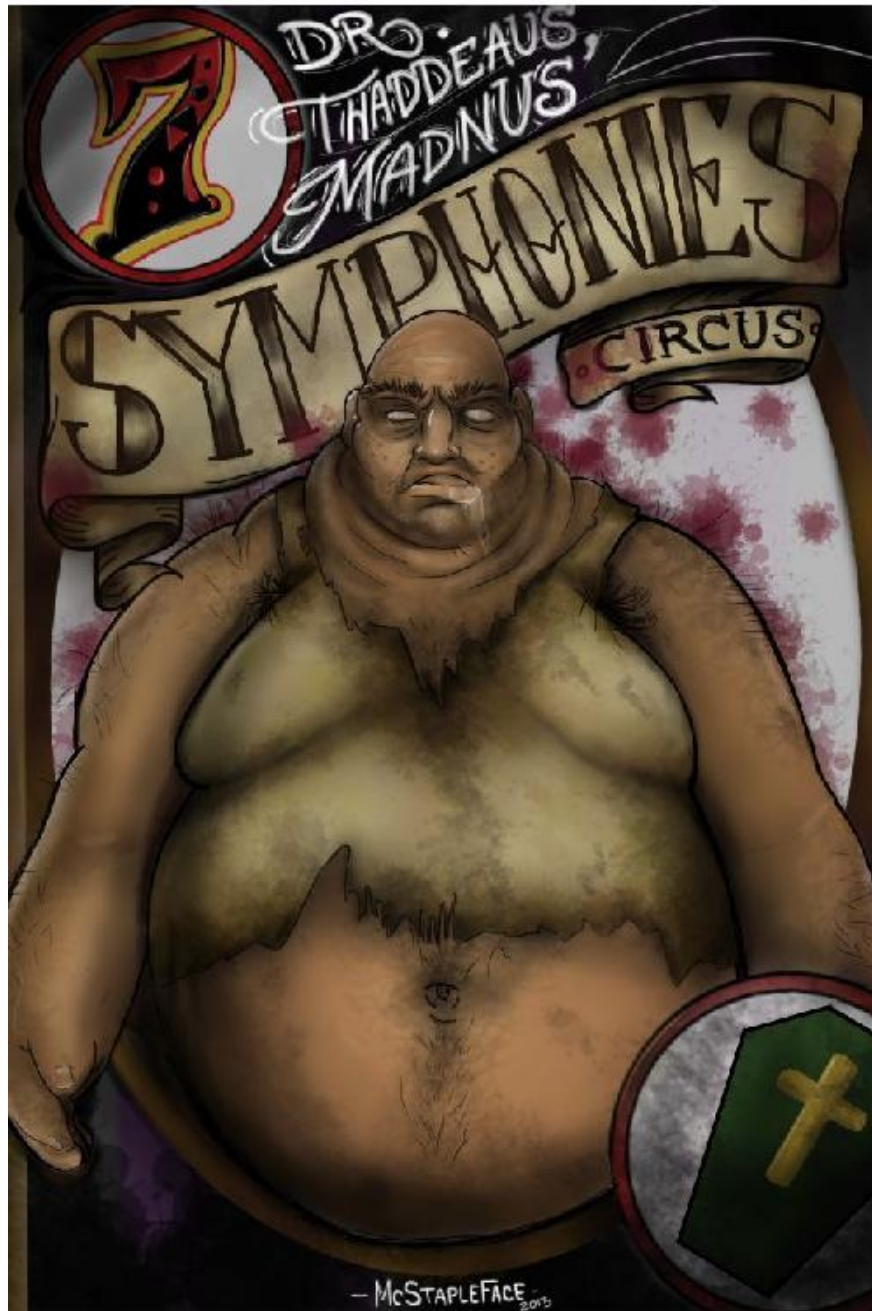
After Crowe had left his hotel room, an employee of the agency had

entered at Haynes' request. He had removed a note, handwritten on a piece of hotel letterhead. The note had been delivered to Haynes, who had instructed it to be

delivered to the home of Elizabeth Wilcox, formerly Elizabeth Crowe.

The note read:

Liz, I could never convince you or anyone else, but what I did was the right thing to do. That doesn't matter, though. I just want you to know, I'm sorry. -Crowe



SECRETS OF THE SEVEN SYMPHONIES CIRCUS

SHENOA CARROLL-BRADD

The World's Fattest Man awoke in a dark corner of a rattling train car, smelling straw, rust, and rot.

An elongated box was against the opposite wall, draped in a tarpaulin, lit by flickers of passing light from the cracks around the door. There was one like it in each of the boxcars shrouded from the sunlight. Dr. Madnus, the ringmaster, never put all his eggs in one basket. He was far too wily a bastard for that.

The World's Fattest Man shifted, feeling sweat pool among his many rolls. He had no way of knowing which one of Madnus' helpers was in the coffin, but the fact that it was in there with him at all made his skin crawl. He stretched, as much as he could, feeling the press of humidity in the boxcar. He wondered what new mark they were steaming towards this time.

Madnus never let him go in the advance party, arriving a day ahead of the circus to spread fliers and drum up interest. Madnus sent younger boys and Cirene, the snake dancer. Cirene always drew them in. He imagined her parading down the street in her spangly outfit, one of her boas asleep on her shoulders.

The World's Fattest Man was too cumbersome, too inconvenient, to ever go on ahead. He had to be hauled in and out of the boxcar with a series of platforms and pulleys,

like a wounded elephant. "Crawl, elephant boy," the others teased. "Show us your little trunk."

He shook his head. It hadn't always been like this. Madnus made him into a freak.

The World's Fattest Man had a name once—Alphre Knocher—back in 1910, before he joined The Seven Symphonies Circus. He'd been sixteen and husky. His life at that time had seemed limited: go to college and try to find a career, or follow in his father's footsteps and learn household carpentry. Neither option had appealed to him, and he'd thought he'd be happier if he could just cut ties to his former life altogether.

The Seven Symphonies Circus had come through the neighboring town of Drayville, and he'd gotten it in his head that he was meant for a life on the road. He'd read *Leaves of Grass* three times and thought that maybe he could travel the world, writing poetry, and sipping from lady luck's cup.

After the show, he had approached the circus owner, Doctor Thaddeaus Madnus, with his hat in hand and sweat on his still hairless lip. As Alphre walked up to the ringmaster, Madnus' face had changed, his broad lips broke into a grin that showed every tooth. That close, Alphre had been able to see cracks and streaks in Madnus' makeup, the ravages of sweat and time.

"My boy!" Madnus said, clapping his shoulder. "Enjoyed the show, did you?"

"Y-yes sir," Alphre muttered.

"Good, good. Be sure to tell your friends." He'd paused then and seemed to look Alphre over. Alphre couldn't meet his eyes but for a half-second at a time.

"Oh my," the ringmaster had said. "I know that face. Yes I do. Don't have many friends, do you?"

Alphre had shaken his head. "No, sir."

“Well, we can’t have everything, can we, son?” Madnus had leaned back and glared at him. “What can I do for you?”

Alphre had crumpled his hat in his hands, unable to release it. “Well, sir, I was hoping I could hire on with you for a spell. I know sums and cooking, and I can do hard labor.” Madnus had given him a skeptical look. “I know I don’t look it, but I’m as hard a worker as you’ll ever find.”

“How old are you, boy?”

“Eighteen, sir.”

Madnus had grinned at that, and Alphre worried if it had been because his voice had quavered on the lie. The ringmaster looked around the big top, and his smile had faded as he watched his workers’ progress.

“I can always use a hard worker,” he’d grumbled.

That was back before Madnus had acquired his *helpers*, when setting up and striking the circus fell to human hands.

Alphre glanced across the boxcar to the covered coffin once more. He didn’t know where the helpers came from but being so close made him sick. He shuddered. It was probably his imagination, but he could smell its contents baking in the stifling heat.

Madnus had not asked any more questions that first night, which was a little disappointing because Alphre had prepared a whole story about how he was an orphan and no one would miss him. Instead, Madnus had clapped him on the back and told him to report to Greenlee, a tall man in a slouchy grey hat. Madnus had declared that night a trial run, and said that if Alphre did a good job, they would discuss permanent employment.

That had been the best night of Alphre’s life. He’d sweated, broken brand new calluses on his palms, and felt

all the while like he had made it into the ranks of illustrious and magical people.

He was happy.

When The Seven Symphonies Circus left town three days later, Alphre went with them. Madnus fed him well and provided him with a bunk. He'd assigned Alphre to help Greenlee with whatever was needed, but Alphre had caught Madnus watching him sometimes, looking at him like a butcher would a hog. After learning what he could from Greenlee, he had been reassigned to study under Magno, The Strongman. Alphre had eaten the same things as Magno: a dozen raw eggs, steak, rolls, mashed potatoes, several helpings of everything. Magno had lifted weights and exercised all day, but Alphre didn't. Alphre had just gotten fat. When he'd brought that up to Madnus, the ringmaster had eyed him and nodded.

"You *do* seem to have gained some weight," Madnus had said. "Maybe strongman understudy isn't the best fit for you."

A few days later, Madnus had approached Alphre. "One of the freaks is sick," he had said. "Can you fill in for a few hours?"

Alphre had been appalled, but he agreed. In hindsight, he wished he'd asked which freak.

Madnus and Greenlee had taken off Alphre's shirt and pants, then puffed grey powder on his skin and hooked a long fake nose onto his face.

"Your back story is the Elephant Boy," Madnus told him. "Abandoned as a child, you were raised in the wilds of Africa by a herd of elephants. Don't speak. Don't get up off your hands and knees. You can trumpet if you want. Let me hear your trumpet." Alphre had tried his best, but Madnus winced. "No trumpeting. Just tromp around in circles and eat some peanuts."

"What peanuts?"

"The ones folks'll throw," Greenlee said.

Alphre had looked pleadingly to Madnus. "Sir?"

Madnus had waved a hand, dismissing any further talk. "Pretend you're an elephant. Make it fun." They dragged him to the Elephant Boy's booth. "But no hands. Elephants don't have hands." Alphre'd dropped to his knees, wondering what his mother would say if she saw him there, crawling through the straw like an animal.

Staring at the coffin, Alphre thought of his mother. He hadn't seen or heard from her since he signed up and didn't even know if she was still alive. The past ten years had dragged on, and Alphre was tired—tired of eating, tired of the stares, the mocking crowd, the disgusted noises women made under their breaths as they passed his stall.

Alphre didn't speak much anymore, and people rarely spoke to him, rendering his tongue out of practice. After he reached a certain size, people stopped seeing him as anything other than a breathing collection of rolls and bulges. They seemed to forget he had ears, and as a result, he'd learned so much over the last decade.

He was fed up with the secrets, the lies, and the deaths.

Alphre made up his mind. He began rocking back and forth, trying to tip himself over. He succeeded, with a sound like a giant pancake being flipped on a hot griddle. The coffin sat only four feet away. He started to crawl.

After his first night as The Elephant Boy, Madnus had raised his pay. He'd sworn that Alphre was the best he'd ever seen, but if he wanted to be truly great, he would need to put on more mass.

Alphre occasionally wondered if his life would have turned out differently had he just said no. But he didn't say no, and Madnus had assigned him weekly weight quotas to reach. He was restricted from any unnecessary movement. At first,

it had been relaxing, like a paid vacation. But crawling around on his knees, carrying all that weight, had soon become painful. His knees grew swollen and red until Madnus had stopped dusting him in grey powder and finally canceled The Elephant Boy.

Soon after, Greenlee had given Alphre a chair.

"Don't stop eating," Madnus had said. "You'll be our *biggest* attraction."

And just like that, Alphre became The Great Monstrosity, The World's Fattest Man.

Alphre struggled forward, his flabby stomach dragging along the dirty, straw-covered bottom of the boxcar. He was coated in a sheen of sweat. His chest hurt, but he continued crawling forward an inch at a time, dragging himself by his huge, heavy arms, his legs trailing behind, just extra ballast.

For a while, Alphre had been able to get around on a pair of heavy crutches. Madnus scolded him, claiming he was doing harm, and that he should let his legs rest.

Alphre did not listen. He had enjoyed whatever slivers of freedom he could find.

At one town stop, Madnus had brought a physician in to perform a yearly physical exam of all the talent and crew. The doctor's breath reeked of gin. He had started with Alphre's reflexes and then weighed him. Alphre must have fallen asleep because the next thing he remembered was waking up to find the doctor gone. The backs of his ankles ached, but he'd grown too fat to see or reach them.

Madnus told him the doctor's orders were to stay off his feet for at least a month, otherwise it might result in permanent damage. He wouldn't say what exactly the doctor had done.

Alphre's weight had swelled in the following weeks. His ankles itched and ached, driving him mad because he couldn't scratch them. When the time had finally come for Alphre to walk again, he'd fallen over immediately upon standing. He had called for help, and Madnus came.

The ringmaster had shaken his head sadly. "You shouldn't have pushed yourself," he had said. "Now look what you've done."

Alphre had dreamed that if he just rested his legs long enough, they'd recover, and he'd be able to walk away from The Seven Symphonies Circus. But deep down, he had known the truth: Madnus would never let him leave. Madnus had crippled him.

Alphre inched closer and closer. His hand landed on the tarpaulin and pulled it away, revealing a coffin of dark, polished wood, carved and inscribed in a language he couldn't read. Once he was next to it, Alphre definitely smelled the corruption of the thing inside. It hadn't been his imagination.

He slapped a flabby wing of an arm over the casket's lid and began the laborious crawl towards the boxcar door.

Madnus' helpers were one of the Circus' many ugly secrets. Alphre knew how they went out into the town whenever the Circus stopped and preyed upon those who didn't come to see the show. Madnus told them not to harm patrons, but the rest were fair game. He believed it was a small price for a Circus ticket, a small price to save their lives.

The casket was heavier than he'd expected, and Alphre's progress slowed down even more as he oozed across the boxcar floor. The way his heart fought in his chest, and as hard as it was to breathe, he didn't think he had much longer left.

For a while, Madnus used to bring him hired girls as a reward for a year's work well done, if sitting in a chair and stuffing his face while strangers sneered could have been considered work. He hadn't brought Alphre a girl in three years, not since he'd accidentally smothered one.

He'd wondered if her family ever learned the truth of what had happened to her, or if one day, the girl's mother had woken up with a hole in her life. Most likely, no one had learned of her demise. Madnus' helpers probably saw to that. There was a popular snack booth by Cirene's tent, and he could always smell it from his chair, the aromas of roasting meat and spices forever teasing his nose. The booth's painted sign had read: "Exotic Morsels from the Mysterious East," and he had often seen patrons wander by with skewers of spiced, browned meat. Camel, the signs had claimed, but Alphre had never seen a live camel near the circus, let alone a cleaned and butchered one. When patrons had asked how the meat could be so fresh, they had been told it was owed to a secret preservation technique known only in the orient and taught only to a dozen chefs a decade.

Alphre had seen the helpers come stalking back through the fairgrounds after a kill, flushed with life. He had known not get close or to ask any questions. They had paid him no mind, but he'd overheard them speak of The Angel.

The Angel's shows had all been in the Big Top, where Alphre hadn't been allowed. But he'd seen patrons exit with tears on their cheeks, smiling and laughing, as if drunk. Alphre wished he could see The Angel perform. He'd have liked that almost as much as being able to walk again.

Alphre reached the door and collapsed, his sweaty face pressed to the boxcar's filthy floor, his breath wheezing. He

lay there for nearly fifteen minutes, trying to regain his strength. His heart pounded against his ribcage so hard that he thought it might burst. At last, he pulled himself up and flipped the latch on the door. Once the top opened, he collapsed like a cresting wave of fat.

Despite everything, Alphre had understood his place at the circus. He hadn't been so hopelessly naive. Madnus had explained that people flocked to his shows for two reasons, and two reasons only:

The light—they come to see something amazing, something awe-worthy, something they'd never be able to do, something that filled them with wonder and hope and made them feel alive. That was Cirene's job. That was The Angel's dominion.

And there was the dark—the ugly, the disgusting, the place where the misfortunate provided something hideous for the patrons to gawk at. The patrons wanted to feel superior. They wanted their little lives to look better by comparison to the disfigured, deformed, and wrong. Alphre had provided that service, faithfully and without complaint, for years.

But no longer.

Resting on his enormous stomach, Alphre pried the boxcar door open an inch. The wind whistled, blowing cool air on his face. He smiled. His suffering was not for nothing. He pried the door open a little more, then gripped the edge, and pulled the creaking wood fully open, taking comfort in the knowledge that his soul would persist, unlike Madnus' poor, damned helpers.

The wind roared and sucked at him. The dry fields passed in a yellow blur. Alphre slapped one huge arm on the casket once more, making a sound like a slaughtered animal

dropping to the floor. Something moved inside the coffin, then frantically scratched and pounded against the lid. Alphre took a deep, labored breath, and shoved the coffin out. It disappeared into the air, whipping out of sight.

Alphre heard the crack of wood explode into splinters on impact, and a horrible, inhuman screeching as Madnus' helper was suddenly forced into the strong summer sunshine.

Madnus would hear it. Madnus would know.

Alphre dragged himself to the edge of the door. The train's brakes squealed. He gripped the floor edge, then heaved himself out. He tumbled onto the weedy ground, feeling the gravel bite into his flesh, chewing him apart. He rolled down the embankment, the world going blurry.

He'd done it. He was finally free.

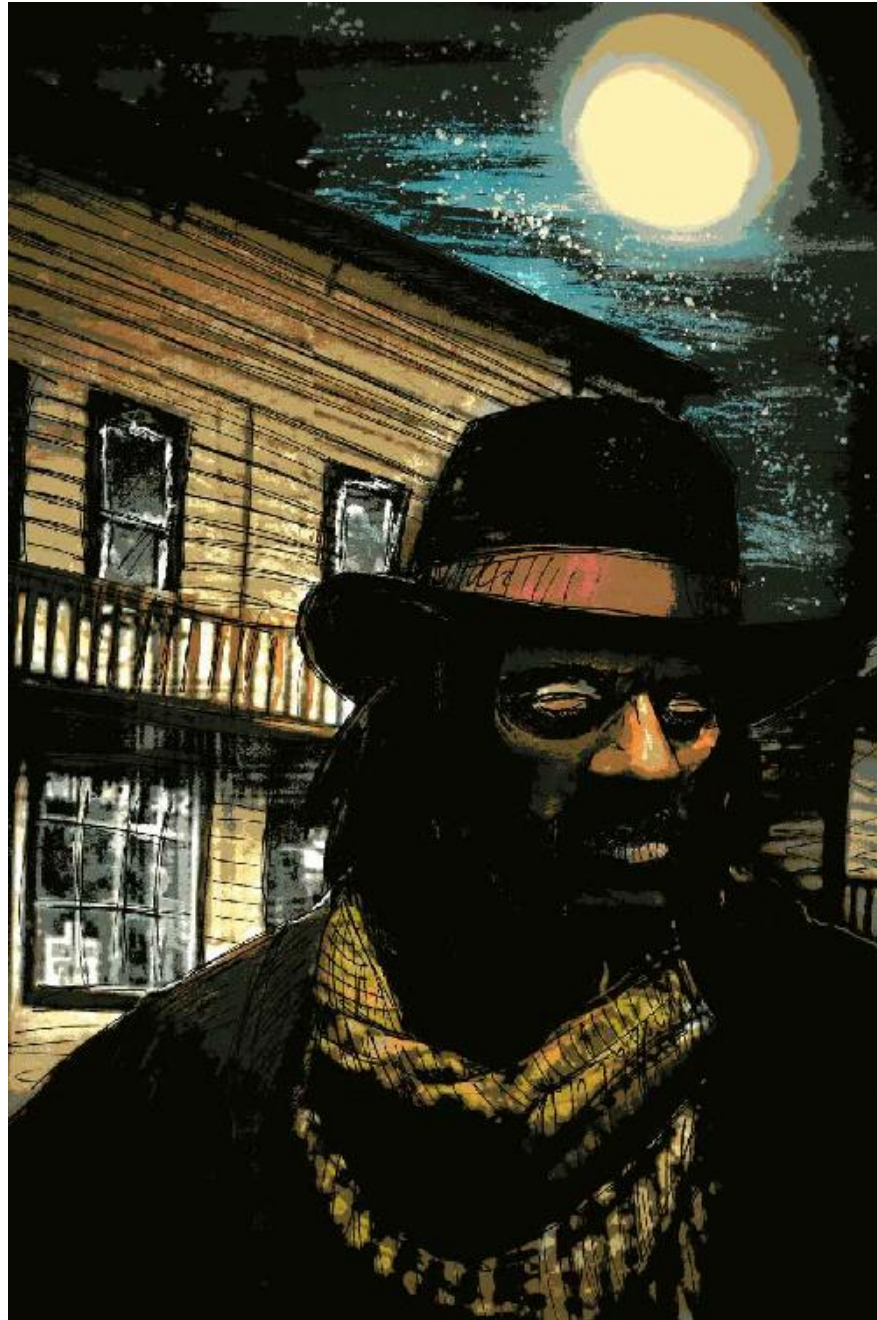
Alphre came to rest in a little culvert, where dirty water trickled around his swollen feet and patches of wild mustard and black-eyed Susans bloomed. Pain burned throughout his body. Wide gashes seeped blood through pockets of erupted fat. His ankles and knees took the worst and he did not possess the strength to move another inch.

The train's brakes ceased squealing at last.

Alphre closed his eyes and sighed. The breeze was nice. The air was warm, but not hot, not suffocating like it had been in the boxcar. He heard shouting, and swearing, the trample of feet.

Madnus was coming. Madnus would kill him for what he had done.

But for right then, Alphre was happy. He may not have walked away, but he'd managed to quit The Seven Symphonies Circus after all.



WINDFALLS

BENNIE L. NEWSOME

"Ever since the beginning of time, when God first came upon the face of the Earth and banished darkness into the deepest corners, there has always been evil-a malevolent force bent on revenge against the great Being of Light and His creations. Being the all-seeing entity that He is, God recognized this evil and knew its intentions. So the Almighty established two bodies of light: the sun, and gave it authority over day, and the moon, a lesser light that watched over the night. The sun performed its duties to perfection. It kept the darkness at bay. However, that moon...well...let's just say the moon is a fickle thing. It is constantly sleeping with one eye half-open. Even when the moon is fully awake, it does a poor job of keeping the darkness away. Then there are times when the moon doesn't show up at all. Oh, yes! That moon is a fickle thing. And sometimes I question its allegiance."

Andrew Smith could see the full moon at the edge of his peripheral. He had been grateful for its presence when darkness first descended, but for some unexplained reason, the young man had grown wary of the celestial body. The moon seemed to follow Andrew, and he knew his suspicion to be crazy thinking. The way the moon appeared to focus on him made Andrew uneasy. Therefore, he found a bit of relief when it disappeared behind the first set of raw constructed buildings.

“Ghost town,” Andrew muttered. A line of interconnecting buildings stretched along his right hand side. A similar set of buildings also sat on his left. Together, they formed a town that rested in the middle of a forsaken desert.

Andrew gripped the front of his wide-brimmed gamblers hat and tilted it upwards so he could have a better view of the wooden establishments. His brown eyes searched the darkened windows for any signs of life. As he walked on, nothing stirred within the buildings.

Another one bites the dust.

Ghost towns had become a regular sight for him as he made his way from the prejudiced South, looking to make a new life in the Northwest. Settlers from all over the United States were rushing towards the new frontier, hoping to find a prosperous life. Many had created settlements like the one Andrew stumbled upon, and after finding the land inhospitable, they had moved on. There were numerous ghost towns strewn across the Wild West.

Andrew’s dusty black boots clunked against the hard ground. A warm wind blew through the town, causing his rifle frock coat to billow about his ankles as he strolled down the street of what the slanted welcome sign dubbed Windfalls. Because of its small stature, Andrew figured the town was a trading post in its heyday.

He could feel the light weight of his satchel hanging from his shoulder, a blatant reminder that he would have to search the town for provisions come morning. His trip had taken much longer than he had expected after having to put down his horse, North Star. The poor thing had twisted its ankle in a concealed hole out in that barren wasteland. A lame horse was nothing more than a hindrance, so Andrew did what he had to. With his trip extended, his supplies barely allowed him to make it to Windfalls. More important was that his body demanded sleep. Andrew made his way to the nearest building for some well-needed rest.

"Is it possible that the moon is a sentient being?

"Let's say the moon is capable of having rational thoughts and feelings. Let's say the moon watched me on that life-altering night. It watched me as I entered the abandoned inn I chose for shelter. I remember being thankful for the moonlight that shone through several windows, helping me find my way. I was thankful, but I should have been afraid. For that silvery moonlight was nothing more than the moon's attention fixed on me. It lost me as I made my way up a set of rickety stairs but found me again when I entered a room on the second floor. I unwittingly made my way into its luminous line of sight, set my stuff down, and made camp. I felt secure in the moon's glow, but what I should have felt was fear. Because, let's say the moon hung there in the sky and watched as I inventoried my belongings, that the moon waited until I fell asleep before it grabbed a nearby cloud and pulled it across its face.

"I have no idea if the moon is a sentient being. I do know for one reason or another the moon hid its face, and evil was given free reign."

An hour after Andrew fell asleep upon the floor of that abandoned inn, a mysterious wind blew through the desert, pushing along the few clouds that hung in the sky. One large cloud in particular drifted across the starry background until it blocked the light of the moon. Then the wind ceased just as quickly as it started. The wooden buildings shuddered. Rusty wind chimes cried out in alarm.

Skeletal hands lifted from fissures that appeared on the main street of Windfalls, jutting upward like devilish plants. Boney arms followed hands, bent at the elbows to push against the ground in order to elevate their bodies. Skulls appeared, and those ghastly craniums groaned as they

hauled themselves from their unmarked graves. After the dirt-stained skulls came necks, then spines and rib cages, and finally, the pelvic bones and legs. In moments, dozens of skeletons looked around as if familiarizing themselves with their environment.

The skeletons stood in silence for several seconds. Another gust of wind swept the land. Great clouds of dust rose up and swirled around the rattling undead. Dirt clung to their bones, thickening until it made putrid flesh. The evil forces at work appeared to be using God's recipe for creating mankind, but with horrifying results. Rancid meat and tattered skin now covered the skeletons, making them nothing more than zombies one might hear talked about around campfires. Although, the real McCoy was much worse than anything one's imagination could conceive.

The ghastly zombies staggered about, testing out their recently formed limbs. They moaned as a way to exercise their vocal cords. The first zombie found his voice. It was an unearthly sound, chilling to the bone. And its first words were, "Yee-haw!"

A loud whooping noise pulled Andrew from his slumber. His eyes snapped open. He remained on the dusty floor, staring up at the ceiling, listening to his surroundings. He heard a multitude of voices from outside.

What's going on?

Andrew considered the possibility that a band of ruffians had come along. Needless to say, such an occurrence would not bode well for him. Ruffians were merciless to anyone not part of their gang, and the fact that Andrew was a colored man would only make matters worse.

Oh, Lord! I need your protection!

He pushed his blanket aside and rolled onto his knees. He crawled across the floor until he came to a stop in front of the only window. Ever so slowly, he lifted his head and peered down to the street. Old lanterns gave light to the town. And it was by these lights that Andrew was able to

see people moving about. Men with debonair attire and women wearing fancy dresses strolled up and down the main street, entering and exiting buildings. They did not appear to be ruffians, but there was no doubt that what had been a ghost town just a few hours ago now brimmed with life.

Andrew questioned his eyes as he stared down at the people going about their business.

Did a caravan decide to hunker down for a spell, just as he had?

His thoughts were interrupted by muffled whispering and giggling from just outside the door. He spun away from the enigmatic scene below and fixed his eyes on the splintered barrier to his room. Andrew's heart pounded furiously. He waited a few minutes hoping that the people would go away, but the playful conversation continued.

He scrambled across the dusty floor and proceeded to gather his belongings, throwing them into his satchel. He hastily dressed and scanned the floor once more to ensure he had not forgotten anything. When satisfied, Andrew crept to the door. He placed his ear against the wood and listened. The flirtatious conversation tapered off, only to be replaced by sloppy sounding kisses and sensual moaning.

All I have to do is walk out there like I belong. How are they to know I don't?

Andrew took a deep, steadying breath, then opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"A hermit crab is a creature born weak and defenseless. It comes into this world without a shell, without a home. Because of this, a newborn hermit crab must find a shell. The crab does not craft a shell of its own. It comes across the remains of a dead sea snail and moves in. One creature's death aids to the continuance of another's life."

"Now, with that said, consider the demon. Much like the hermit crab, demonic creatures are weak and defenseless when they first enter the land of the living. Without a vessel, they are nothing more than shades. So their first task is to find a shell absent of its previous tenant, for a demon cannot create one of its own.

"I admit the thought had never occurred to me before I came across Windfalls. The place was an empty shell filled with a demonic presence. Exiting the room, I did not look at the couple and think that they were empty vessels filled with evil. No. When I stepped into that hallway draped with cobwebs and coated with grime, I was offended at how they halted to stare at me.

"How you fine folks doing this evening?' I asked with a nod of my head.

I tried to ignore their stare as I strolled past them. But in my mind, I was experiencing the very racism that had forced me to leave Alabama.

"I walked down to the saloon on the first floor. Lantern light illuminated the room; tobacco smoke and the smell of whiskey permeated the air. As soon as my boots touched the landing, all activity froze. The card game being played in the far left corner of the room halted. The pianist stopped tickling the ivories. The bartender quit performing his duties, and every patron paused their conversations. All eyes focused on me.

"Racists bastards! I thought-an understandable reaction considering the circumstance.

"I had intended on leaving as fast as I could, but once confronted with such a disrespectful display, I chose to stand my ground. Every man is created equal. And by God, I was going to get the respect due. I cringe with shame when I think about how my pride nearly cost me my life that night."

Andrew gazed about the crowded room. He was an unwilling stage performer, standing before a captivated audience. Eventually, the surprise he experienced from their coordinated actions wore off and was replaced by outrage. They acted as if they had never seen a colored man. Andrew figured if that was the case, he would be more than happy for them to make his acquaintance.

He recomposed himself before sauntering over to the bar. The sound of his boots clopping against the wooden floor was the only thing to be heard.

"Good day to you," Andrew said happily, addressing one of the slack-jawed men seated at the bar and receiving no response.

Oh, well.

He claimed the splintered barstool stationed to the right of the rude fellow. Once seated, Andrew removed his hat and set it on the counter. He looked to the burly barkeep. "Whiskey on the rocks."

The man cleared his throat. "We ain't got no ice."

"Straight will do."

"Whiskey straight, coming up."

And, as suddenly as things halted, everything resumed. The patrons returned to their conversations, cursing and raucous laughter erupted over at the card table, and the piano began emitting a lively tune.

Andrew looked over his shoulder, watching everyone go about their business. It was as if somebody blew a whistle that he couldn't hear.

Something ain't right.

The bartender slammed a glass on the countertop, returning Andrew's attention forward. "Two coppers," the brute said.

Andrew pulled a silver piece from his purse and slid the coin over to the man. "Keep the change."

"Much obliged."

The bartender reached for the silver coin, and when he did, the cloud covering the moon shifted. Perhaps the winds of fortune blew in, or the moon felt a twinge of guilt. Whatever the reason, a ray of moonlight broke through the overcast and entered one of the establishment's dirt-stained windows. The luminescent beam highlighted the dust motes in its path and rested on the bartender's hand.

Andrew watched as the hand transformed from grimy flesh to nothing but bones with tattered, decayed meat hanging from it. The shaft of moonlight only lasted a few seconds before the silvery disk was covered by clouds once more.

The saloon became quiet, causing Andrew to slowly glance to his left. The slack jawed man stared directly at him with a ravenous look in his eyes. Andrew turned his head to the right and saw the same expression in the faces of the other men along the bar.

"I guess I'll be moving along—" His statement was interrupted by the barkeep lunging towards him. The man wrapped his hairy hands around Andrew's neck and yanked him over the counter. Andrew's flailing legs kicked his stool over. Drinking glasses flew and shattered. The bartender slammed him down where his head thumped hard against the floor.

Andrew's vision wavered. His hand fumbled for his holster.

The bartender loomed over him. The zombie's mouth opened wide, baring rotten teeth. Slobber dripped from his gaping maw, and the stench of death wafted out. It unleashed a heart-wrenching roar before rushing forward.

Quickly pulling his revolver up to the zombie's chin, Andrew cocked the hammer back and pulled the trigger.

Pow!

Brain matter and blood sprayed his face as the barkeep's head exploded. His eardrums rang from the deafening shot.

There was no time to be repulsed. Andrew pushed the collapsed body away and climbed to his feet just in time to

see other zombies hurrying across the room, the majority of them already clambering over the bar.

“Come here, boy!” one yelled.

Andrew shot off a hand that reached for him. He sent another bullet into the monster’s head, sending it crashing to the floor.

Three more head shots were fired, three more fell. Andrew holstered the smoking pistol and removed a second gun. In the midst of changing weapons, he watched the undead rush the bar like it was happy hour and he was the only man on duty. Andrew cursed. He hopped onto the bar, stomping a hand beneath his boot. He fired his pistol, snapping a zombie’s head back before it collapsed.

Andrew raced down the length of the bar. When he reached its end, he leapt over the horde, coat flapping behind him and knees raised high to avoid the extended hands. He landed before the saloon’s double doors and rushed right through, running full speed down the steps and then halting with his attention focused on the open desert beyond Windfalls. He began to move in that direction, but his nearly empty satchel brought him to a stop.

Damn. Supplies!

Andrew scanned the buildings lining the main street and noticed that all activities had stopped. The women held the hems of their dresses above the dirt, but they no longer walked. The men also stood paused. Much like in the saloon, the town had grown quiet. Every pair of eyes focused on him.

“I miss when they were just racist,” he groaned.

The saloon doors exploded and Andrew’s drinking buddies rushed out. The zombies standing in the streets quickly charged in his direction.

Despite his frantic mindset, Andrew managed to spot a decrepit general store. He sprinted to the opposing porch and burst into the dimly lit shop.

“Can I help you?”

Pow!

A bullet tore through the head of the old man standing behind the cash register. His knees buckled, and the counter's edge cracked his skull. Andrew sprinted over to the dust-covered shelves without missing a beat. He came across some grimy canned goods with no labels and tossed them into his satchel.

The rusty bell above the shop's door jingled. Andrew spun around to find the undead spilling in through the entrance. He raised his pistol and fired a shot, knocking one unholy creature to the floor, temporarily plugging up the doorway. Andrew hurried over to the cash register. Jars were positioned next to the machine. He reached into one and removed some jerky. He grabbed a handful of rice from another container and some dried beans from a third.

The shop became quickly crowded. A fluttering lamplight caused their shadows to dance upon the wall. Before attempting an escape, Andrew knelt behind the counter to reload his revolvers. His trembling hands dropped a couple of bullets.

"Dammit!"

He retrieved the stray rounds and loaded them along with others into his pistols, then clicked the barrels into place.

Andrew took a deep breath, said a prayer, and hopped up from behind the counter like a jack-in-the-box springing out of its prison.

Andrew cocked the hammers on both pistols and pulled the triggers. The two zombies nearest to him fell. Andrew climbed onto the counter and fired four more rounds before jumping into the crowd. Decaying hands took hold of him. Andrew wriggled out of his coat and moved forward. A mob stood before the door, gnashing their teeth and groping. Andrew fired two more shots. The aroma of spent gunpowder filled the air.

Shrugging off hands and kicking away bodies, Andrew made his way outside. Both hammers cocked back again,

and the zombies that fell allowed Andrew to break through the mob.

Only two more bullets, Andrew reminded himself. Everyone in town appeared to have gathered at the general store. He cut past them until his path to freedom was unobstructed.

He raced along the dirt road, heading towards the edge of town. All Andrew had to do was pass beneath the slanted welcoming sign, and he would be home free. A hundred yards became eighty, then sixty, then forty-five.

The distance standing between him and the exit of the godforsaken town dwindled. The zombies fell further and further behind. Then Andrew noticed a watering trough off to the side and came to a sudden stop.

He glanced back at the approaching mob and then to the watering trough. He only had two bullets left—one per revolver. Knowing he wouldn't last without water, Andrew hurried over to the trough. The zombies were eighty yards away. He lay his pistols down and removed a nearly empty canteen from his satchel. Seventy yards. Andrew unscrewed the canteen's top.

"Come on, come on, come on."

His heart beat furiously in his chest. Fifty yards. When the top came undone, Andrew took hold of the water spout's handle and pushed down. The apparatus creaked, but no water came out.

"Please!"

The dead were only about thirty-five yards away. He picked up one of his pistols and fired it at the crowd. One zombie fell, many more continued onward.

One bullet left.

Andrew lifted the handle and pushed it back down hard. Nothing. He said another prayer as he lifted and lowered the handle once more—a drip of water spilled into his canteen. His heart was on the verge of busting from his chest. Only

twenty yards separated him from the zombies. There was no way he could get the water and escape.

Ten yards.

Andrew picked up his pistol and fired his last bullet. That lone round did not factor into his survival, but one less zombie would be feasting on his innards. He dropped the pistol and resumed pumping. A great deal of water emerged.

His next draw from the faucet brought even more, and it was not as brown with rust.

Eight yards.

Andrew frantically screwed the cap onto his canteen.

Five.

The stampeding undead were finally upon him. Their teeth chomped hungrily, hands stretched outward in hopes of being the first to feast. In one quick motion, Andrew shouldered the canteen and swept down for his guns.

Three yards.

I should've saved a bullet for myself.

The lead zombie tackled Andrew to the ground and the rest piled on, wrestling for a taste of flesh. Andrew screamed and thrashed with every bit of energy, but the weight was too much. He gritted his teeth and held his breath to keep from inhaling the rotten aroma.

Get it over with, Andrew thought and let his muscles relax.

Just then, a ray of sunlight peeked over the horizon.

As they began to rip into him, Andrew closed his eyes and prayed. But for the third time in less than an hour, the zombies halted. Tendrils of smoke rose from their eyeballs as they stared at that wink of brilliance. Suddenly, their flesh burst into flames. Painful howls emitted by the undead caused Andrew to close his eyes even tighter, preventing him from seeing the zombies dissipate into clouds of ash and dust and bone.

Andrew lay beneath the skeletal remains, body in the fetal position, hands covering his head. When he finally opened

his eyes, he peered through the bones and saw the sun chasing away the last bit of darkness.

"Can't say for certain if the sun and moon are sentient beings. But that morning, as I clawed my way from beneath the hill of corpses, I developed a new respect for that fiery orb which rules the day with an iron fist. And as the weakened moon slunk away with the fleeing darkness, I developed a suspicion."

-Andrew Smith

-EDITORS-

Joseph Wade Zulauf was born on October 7, 1984 in Truckee, California. He lived at Lake Tahoe before moving to Baltimore, Maryland where he resides with his wife and daughter.

J. W. Zulauf is an American author with a unique narrative voice that rings across many genres of writing, including literary fiction, horror, suspense, and comedy. He is the recipient of the Marjorie Flack Award for Fiction and has had poetry and fiction published in *Amaranth*. Two of his poems appear in the anthology: *Cosmic Outlaws: Coming of Age After The End of Nature*. Most recently, J. W. Zulauf has had a story published with *Inaccurate Realities*.

Kristopher Mallory is a married father of two from Glen Burnie, MD. He runs StealthFiction.com Kris is the author of several short science fiction and horror stories. He is most proud of "Master Stargazer."

Outside of writing, Kris traveled the world while serving as an aircrew member in the Air Force and currently works as an I.T. consultant.

-AUTHORS-

Exploration of Room B: Aric Sundquist, is a graduate of Northern Michigan University and holds an MA in Creative Writing. His stories have appeared in various publications, including The Best of Dark Moon Digest, Evil Jester Digest Vol. 1, and Blood Rites: An Invitation to Horror. In 2012, he was hired as an acquisitions editor/scriptwriter for Evil Jester Comics and is currently working on a new line of graphic novels.

Nightmare Bird Takes Flight: Mike Phillips is author of The World Below and Reign of the Nightmare Prince. His short stories have appeared in ParAbnormal Digest, Cemetery Moon, Sinister Tales, Beyond Centauri, the World of Myth, Mystic Signals and many others. Online, his work has appeared in Lorelei Signal, Kzine, Bewildering Stories, Midnight Times, and Fringe.

He is best known for his Crow Witch and Patrick Donegal series.

Fair Trade: Ben Pienaar was born in South Africa in 1991 and moved to Australia in 2000, where he lives and, more importantly, writes his days away. He works two jobs so he

can finance his crippling addiction to coffee. He spends his free time reading until his eyes hurt, and sometimes playing tennis.

After countless submissions, he got four stories published: "Beyond," "Dreamer," "Fair Trade," and "Till Death." The rest of his stories can be found on his website: Free Nightmares. His dream is to one day make grown men shiver with fear and traumatize small children. He writes obsessively in hopes that he can pass his nightmares on to others, so they might leave him alone.

Sparrow Ridge: Sean Grigsby lives in central Arkansas with his wife and son, where he works full time as a firefighter/EMT. Sean has had several short stories published in anthologies such as "Children of the Moon" and "Christmas is Dead." He is currently working on his first novel.

Sweat Like Honey: Ron J. Cruz breathes and pens fiction in a hovel located in one of the seedier parts of Sacramento, California. While he teaches composition at Folsom Lake Community College, there are only a few vocations he hasn't attempted.

After a tour in the navy, a run through the police academy, writing for several newspapers, a stint in hell as a copy editor, years managing many random establishments (athletic clubs to laser tag arenas), time processing monetary transactions for a mutual fund company, and selling real estate after the market failed-he remembered he loved writing.

He has been published in Sanitarium, 69 Flavors of Paranoia, Not One of Us, Literary Orphans, Surreal Grotesque, Bewildering Stories, and more.

Home from the Sea: William Meikle is a Scottish writer out of Canada, with eighteen novels published in the genre and over 300 short story credits in thirteen countries. His work has appeared in a number of professional anthologies and magazines with recent sales to Nature Futures, Penumbra, Buzzy Mag, and others. He lives in Newfoundland where whales, bald eagles, and icebergs keep him company. When he's not writing, he dreams of fortune and glory.

Under the City: L. Chan lives with his wife and a dog in a tropical city. His dog was briefly internet famous, but he is not. When he is not working, he is busy collecting rejection letters in all shapes and sizes. His weapons of choice are science fiction and horror.

His work has appeared in Stupefying Stories.

The Fall of Silas Galloway : Daniel Weatherer began writing horror after losing his job at the start of 2013, a cruel twist of fate that turned out to be a blessing in disguise! His first ever tale, "The Legend of the Chained Oak" was an immediate success. It is due to be made into a feature length movie.

He lives in Staffordshire, and has a beautiful wife, Jenni. He is a proud full-time dad to his daughter, Bethany.

Bogged Down: Jason Norton is a lifelong fan of comic books, science fiction, and monster-under-your-bed stories. Though he once was a small town newspaper reporter, Jason is now a personal trainer and massage therapist. When not playing volleyball, he studies wilderness survival skills. Honestly, not even he could have made that up.

Jason and his wife live in Powhatan, Virginia. He has a son, two cats, and two dogs. His work has been published at Bewildering Stories, Fiction Vortex, The HorrorZine, and eHorror.

Six Crows: Daniel Davis is the Nonfiction Editor for The Prompt Literary Magazine. His own work has appeared in various online and print journals.

Man of the People: D.W. Gillespie is a longtime horror writer from the middle of Tennessee. When he's not at his day job, he spends most of his time wrangling his two young children, two dogs, and two cats. Most of his nights are spent lying in bed and dreaming up awful, twisted things to write about. These stories, in turn, are read by his loving wife who immediately wonders whether or not she is sharing a bed with a crazy person.

Secrets of the Seven Symphonies Circus: Shenoa Carroll-Bradd writes in a variety of genres from horror to erotic romance.

She lives in Southern California with her brother and dancing dog.

Windfalls: Bennie L. Newsome is a writer and graphic designer from Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of *The BoogeyMann*, *Life is no Fairytale*, and *Agape*.

In addition to his three novels, Bennie has been published in numerous anthologies, including Hallmark's Thanks Mom.

-ARTISTS-

Luke Spooner currently lives and works in southern England. Having recently graduated from the University of Portsmouth with a first class degree, he is now a full-time illustrator for just about any project that peaks his interest.

Despite regular forays into children's books and fairy tales, his true love lies in anything macabre, melancholy, or dark in nature and essence. He believes that the job of putting someone else's words into a visual form, to accompany and support their text, is a massive responsibility as well as being something he truly treasures.

Alexandra "Sanchez" Hewitt was born and raised in southern California. She moved to Maryland during high school. At age 5, she wanted to grow up and work at Disneyland making cartoons. She's a movie buff and zombie fanatic.

Alex has a B.A. in illustration from Towson University.

McStapleface has had a pencil in hand since she was little. She's a successful tattoo artist in the Baltimore area. Also, she doesn't have kids yet, just 3 jerk face cats.

Heather Surprenant contributed the opening piece for the beginning of the book. Her work can be found on the web.

Gart is a graphic designer/illustrator and branding consultant. He dropped out of community college at the ripe age of 18 and never looked back.

Originally from Los Angeles, Gart now lives in Denver, CO where he spends his days glued to his computer like some sick symbiotic parasite.

-SUBMISSION READERS-

Melanie Leitao was born on the East Coast, grew up in the middle of the desert, and currently lives in suburbia. She says she's studying neuroscience because she wants to find out how people tick, but really, she just likes brains. She also enjoys long walks at night and has all the makings of an excellent cat lady.

Several of her short stories have won local awards. Most recently, one of her stories was chosen to represent Anne Arundel Community College in the League of Innovations National Competition.

Katie Abernethy's story began with a rabbit. In 1984, her parents met at an Evangelical conference center in Colorado Springs, where they both worked and lived. Katie's future dad, Don, asked around about what the cute girl, Peggy, liked most, and he discovered her fondness of bunnies.

Even though dating was forbidden to campus inhabitants, Don decided to drop a ball of fluff on Peggy's doorstep. It was as good an introduction as any. A year after they were married, Katie came into existence, because a guy and gal were affected by the story of Jesus...and also because of a rabbit.

Autumn Moreland was born and raised around Baltimore, MD. She and her identical twin sister are the youngest of four children. She enjoys reading anything her friends stick

in front of her, from suspense to horror to social sciences and everything in between.

She spends her free time with her Siberian Husky at the dog park and helping strippers get through college. Because, seriously, is there a better place than a strip club to do algebra and english homework?

Amber Whelpley currently lives on the internet with her husband Matt and dogs Ness and Lucas. Her interest in horror started around the sixth grade when she was repeatedly sent to the principal's office for bringing books to school that were "frightening the other children."

An IT auditor by day, Amber can otherwise be found moderating Reddit.com's 'NoSleep' community and watching TV shows about rich people being mean to each other.

-THANK YOU-THE DAYLIGHT DIMS TEAM

Thank you for reading *Daylight Dims*. It was an honor to bring you this fine collection of stories. If you've enjoyed reading the anthology, our team would love for you to rate it at your favorite site. As a new publication, we appreciate all feedback, especially public ratings and reviews. You can also help with our exposure for the second volume by telling your friends about us through the social media outlets.

As a special bonus, we've partnered with *Chilling Tales For Dark Nights* to bring you fully produced high-quality narration. To experience the audio versions, and to find other *Daylight Dims* goodies, please visit us on the web.

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Once again, thank you so much for joining us.
We'll see you next year!